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MARCH 1985 $2.00

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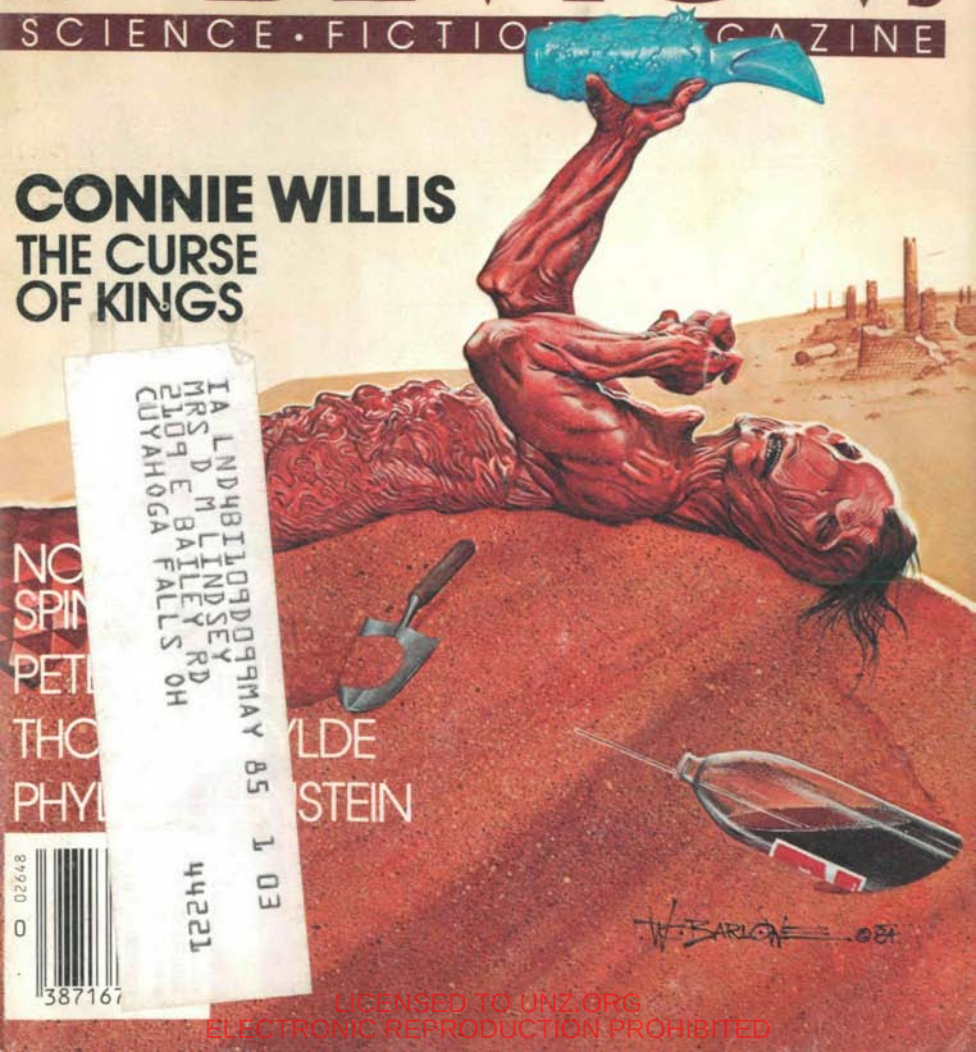

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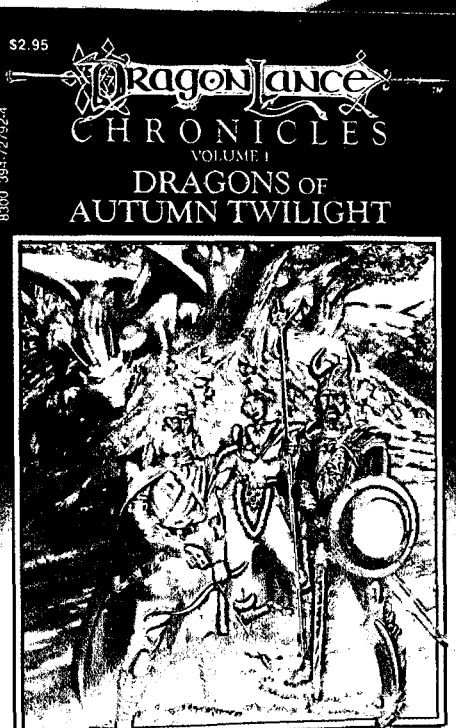

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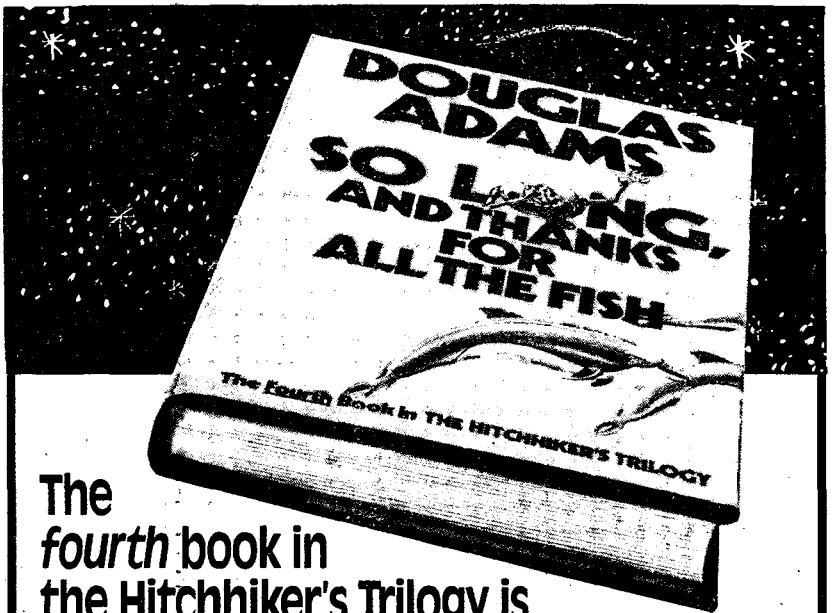

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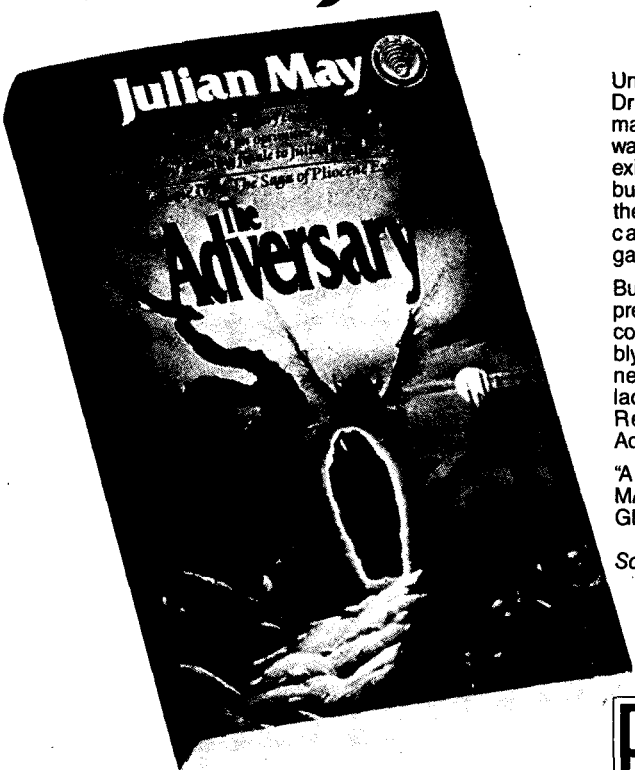

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

MAGIC

Arthur Clarke, in one of his notable oft-quoted comments, said that technology, sufficiently advanced, was indistinguishable from magic.

That's clear enough. If a medieval peasant, or even a reasonably educated medieval merchant, were presented with the sight of a superjet streaking through the sky, or with a working television set, or with a pocket computer, he would be quite convinced that he was witnessing sorcery of the most potent sort. He might also be pretty certain that the sorcery was the devil's work. Consequently if a person from the present (his future) were to go back in time with a pocket computer, for instance, and were to demonstrate its workings, the result might well be exorcism, and perhaps even the torture chamber.

The question in my mind, though, is whether the proposition can be reversed. Is magic necessarily indistinguishable from sufficiently advanced technology? If so, you see, all the tricks of the trade of fantasy could be transferred to science fiction. After all, you don't have to describe the advanced technology in detail (if you could, you would build a working model, patent it and become very rich, perhaps.)

For instance, as a child, I found "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" fascinating. Imagine coming up to a blank mountain wall, saying "Open sesame!," having the wall split in two, and having the halves move apart to reveal the entrance to a cave. Now that's magic!

My wonder and bemusement at such a thing continued undiminished even after I had grown accustomed to approaching doors and having them open automatically at my approach. That wasn't magic; that was just a photocell and therefore no cause for wonder at all (even though I would agree that a medieval merchant, presented with such an automatically-opening door would surely consider it magic.)

Perhaps it is the "Open sesame" that is the real wonder of it. After all, a door that opens at the mere approach of anyone at any time shows no discretion. If there is a codeword that only you know then you control the door; you have *power*.

But then, it is easy to imagine a computer which will only allow the door to open at some appropri-

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ate codeword punched onto its keyboard. Indeed, the time may well come when such a computer may be designed to respond to the spoken command. In that case, it is inevitable that some jokester will have the computer open the door at the command "Open sesame!"

We might go even further and outdo the story. After all, in the tale the door opens to anyone's command of "Open sesame!" and because Ali Baba overhears it, he gains entrance to the cave and grows rich. A computer may be designed to respond only to the typical sound-pattern of a particular voice and then only you may open the door, even if the whole world knows the code-word.

Next, how about Snow White's step-mother, the wicked Queen, who asks her mirror who is the fairest of them all and has the mirror assure her that *she* is. Well, we don't have talking mirrors, but we do have talking television screens, and the medieval merchant would see no distinction.

Some day, when it will become routine to have conversations under conditions of closed-circuit television, a fair young maid can phone her boy friend and say, sentimentally, "Who is the fairest in the land?" and heaven help the boy friend if his image in the mirror doesn't say, "You are the fairest in the land."

A third example that I always found impressive as a child is that of the giant who finds he must chase the hero who has gotten

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away with one or more of said giant's ill-gotten treasures. The giant promptly puts on his "seven-league boots" and is off on a chase. No matter how great a lead our young hero has, we may be sure he will be quickly overtaken.

Now what are seven-league boots? It is usually explained that the giant can traverse seven leagues (21 miles) at every stride. The stories never explain how long it takes him to make one stride, but children always assume (at least I did) that the giant makes as many strides per minute as a man ordinarily does.

The stride of a walking man is about 1 yard. This is, when a foot moves from its rear position to its fore position in ordinary walking, it moves through a distance of a yard. In the same time the much huger stride of the giant moves through 21 miles or 36, 960 yards.

A man walking in an unhurried manner travels at a speed of 3 miles per hour. The giant walking in an unhurried manner, travels at 36, 960 times this speed, or 110,880 miles an hour. This is indeed fast; much faster than I had imagined as a child; or (I am sure) than the tale-spinner who first spoke of seven-league boots imagined.

Someone equipped with seven-league boots can travel from New York to Los Angeles in 1.6 minutes, and can go around the world in 13.5 minutes.

That is astonishing even as an example of high technology. It is faster than any present-day airplane, and is even faster than the rocket ships carrying our astronauts to the Moon.

In fact, so unexpectedly fast are seven-league boots that they defeat their own purpose. Any giant moving 21 miles at a stride, with strides coming as frequently as in an ordinary man's ordinary walk, would be traveling with a speed some 4.4 times escape velocity. In short, he would, at his first stride, launch himself through the atmosphere, and, in a few more strides, find himself in outer space.

And yet there is nothing to keep us from developing seven-league boot capacity. After all that enormously speedy giant is still moving at only 1/6250 the speed of light.

I think I have shown then that magic can be indistinguishable from sufficiently advanced technology; but is that *always* so?

Obviously not, for it is common enough in tales of magic and sorcery to have people able to make themselves invisible, for instance; or to change a man into a frog and vice versa; or to be made capable of understanding the language of animals (and to then find that a horse can discourse as sensibly as Socrates). It is questionable whether such things are within the reasonable purview of technology, though with sufficient ingenuity, a science fiction writer can think of a way of making such things sound technologically plausible.

However, consider that bit of magic that appeals to childhood

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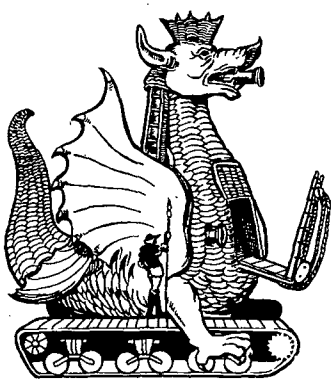

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most of all. There is no question in my mind that *the* most wonderful of all objects is Aladdin's lamp. Tell the truth, now! Haven't you ever dreamed of owning it?

Imagine having a jinn under your absolute control; one who answers "I hear and obey" to all requests, however unreasonable; one who can supply you with uncounted trays of jewels at the snap of a finger; one who can build you an elaborate and luxurious palace overnight and have it come ready-filled with beautiful and compliant damsels.

Ah! That's what I call *living*.

Now we are ready to put our finger on the vital difference between magic and however-high technology. Presented with something so strange we cannot comprehend how it's done, whether by some technological advance or some actually-working magic, we have only to ask one question: "What are the limits within which the ability to do this must work?"

Magic need have no limits; technology must have.

Thus, the jinn of the lamp can build a palace overnight, or even in an instant, and it wouldn't occur to the reader to ask, "But what was the source of the energy required to perform this task?" The jinn of the lamp could travel to Jupiter to obtain the rare egg of the dyk-dyk bird and be back in twenty seconds and no one would dream of pointing out that lo! he has traveled far faster than the speed of light.

I suspect that no technology, however advanced, will ever defy the law of conservation of energy, or of momentum, or of angular momentum, or of electric charge. I suspect that no technology, however advanced, will defy the laws of thermodynamics, or Maxwell's equations, or the indeterminacy principle, or the tenets of relativity and quantum theory.

I say that I "suspect" this because I am perfectly ready to admit that we don't yet know all there is to know about the Universe, that there may turn out to be special conditions, of which we as yet know nothing, in which any or all these limits can be bent or broken.

However, even if these limits are demolished, other limits, more basic and more unbreakable, will replace them. *Some* limit there will remain, as seems absolutely unavoidable to me.

Magic, however, is unlimited; that is its essence. When a science fiction writer presents a tale of magic that must abide by rules and respect limits (as L. Sprague de Camp does in his wonderful "The Incomplete Enchanter") then it is no longer magic; it is merely an exotic technology. O

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Your essay explaining irony (October, 1984) reminds me of the frequent occasions when I have gotten into trouble for laughing at what a teacher of mine once called "black humor." Black humor is when something is so terrible that one wants to cry, but instead one laughs (so thin is the line between laughing and crying!). For example, at the play, "Man of La Mancha" (which I saw three times), I once laughed at a line of dialogue where, right after the scene in which Aldonza had been raped, Don Quixote naively makes a statement to the effect that virtue always triumphs. Then, a lady in the audience whispered about me, "What a terrible person!"

Ironically, in real life, virtue does not always triumph. Furthermore, in my opinion, there is a constant, ongoing battle between good and evil, and I wish you, and all individuals who possess a good heart, victory in this battle!

While I am at it, I would like to tell you that I subscribe to "Asimov's SF Magazine" solely in order to read your delightful and enlightening editorials which remind me of the good old days when I was fascinatingly absorbed as a student of literature classes at the University of Arizona.

Best wishes for success in all your endeavors!

Sincerely,

Joan Danylak
Forest Hills, NY

Thank you, Ma'am—but, you know, "black humor," though a well-established term is liable to misconstruction as the humor typical of such comedians as Richard Pryor and Bill Cosby and should no longer be used in your sense. "Gallows humor" is one alternative—something I'm addicted to. A woman who was once in a concentration camp in Europe introduced a friend and said, "We were once in the same concentration camp together," and I found myself irresistibly impelled to say, "Ah, old college days!" Fortunately, they understood the irony and laughed, but I went around biting my tongue for the rest of the day.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

While I found your Fermi's Paradox debate interesting, I think you left out an important side to the issue. I would like to have seen you include a theological opinion on the subject. Religion has come a long way since Galileo was chastized for suggesting that the Earth was not

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the centrer of the Universe. How do modern theologians feel about extraterrestrial life? I, for one, can see no reason why God would not want to create another intelligent species.
Sincerely,

Benjamin Gleisser
E. Cleveland, OH

We'd be delighted to publish a theological discussion of the matter, if we received an essay of that sort from someone with suitable credentials and if it was reasonably well-written. Certainly, science-fiction writers have considered the matter now and then from a theological point of view but I don't know that any of them are professional theologians.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Staff,

I was planning to write a glowing letter of praise to you about your work on *IAsfm* as a prelude into a smooth segue into a request for your Writer's Guidelines. I reversed myself because the main thrust of this is to obtain the guidelines.

I then re-reversed myself. You know how good you are, as having had two stories published win Nebulas this year and making *Writer's Digest*'s Fiction Fifty Top Ten proves. Since an integral part of SF magazines has historically been reader feedback, I feel I am not being unduly placating by saying how enjoyable the magazine is just because I hope to some day be published in it. Whether or not I am ever published does not alter the fact that *IAsfm* is a good SF magazine, and should have no bearing on whether or not I should give the magazine the praise it deserves.

So keep up the good work, and I will continue to read and enjoy. I especially enjoy the diversification of writers from month-to-month, unlike another magazine that seems to print stories from the same authors month after month. And, enclosed is the SASE for your guidelines.
Sincerely,

William Jennings
Copperas Cove, TX

Be as placating as you like. We always make it clear that the most extravagant praise will not influence us in the acceptance/rejection business, and neither will the bitterest denunciations. However denunciation makes us feel bad, so don't do that unless you absolutely have to.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear People:

Please send me a copy of your manuscript guidelines. I have written a story that I would like to send your way.

I also wanted to thank you for a pleasurable summer's worth of reading. I was given my subscription as a gift—having never seen or heard of your magazine before—and at first was at a loss as to what to do with it (i.e. read it, ignore it, put it on a shelf)—having grown up and gone to college, I thought science fiction was for the illiterate and for children. I was a big fan years and years and years ago (unlike Dr. Asimov, once I passed twenty, I

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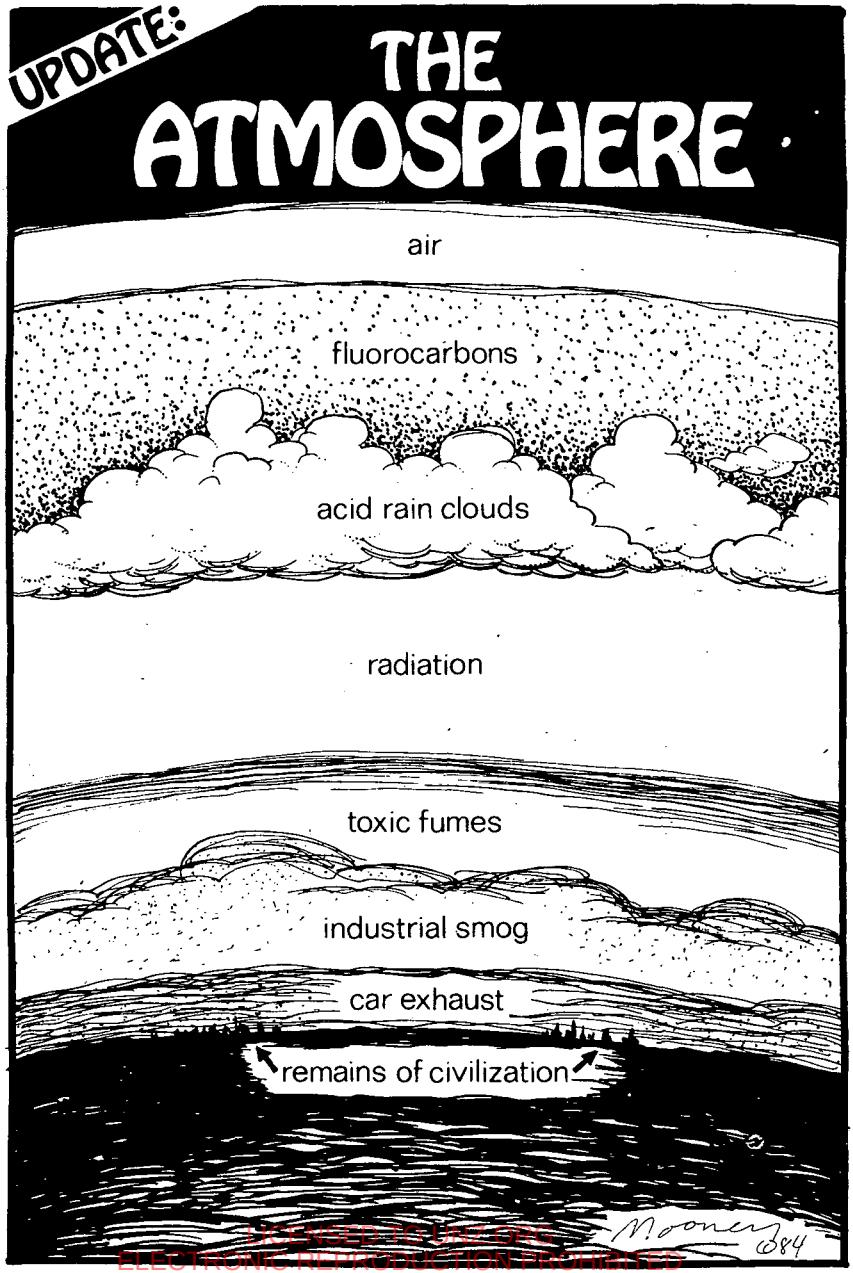

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attained a great age), but let that slip away when I "grew up." Glad to say, I'm a fan again, with every intention of renewing my subscription.

I'll be anxiously awaiting the guidelines—in the meantime, thanks so much.

Vesta L. DeRiso
Gibsonia, PA

You make a mistake when you say you thought SF "was for the illiterate and for children," as though the two are synonymous. There are any number of children's stories that I reread frequently as an adult with undiminished pleasure, for a good children's story is totally literate, believe me. (My favorite example would be the books of E. Nesbit.) On the other hand, something that is for illiterates would be scorned by an intelligent child as thoroughly as by an intelligent adult. But, in any case, welcome back. I hope you never leave us again.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editor and whatsisname,

I hate to quibble—haven't since the beginning of *IAsfm*—but truly I must take small exception to a line in John Ford's fascinating "Heat of Fusion."

Y., on her deathbed, is described as "intubated. . . . Her voice was clear, however."

While the term "intubated" can refer to the insertion of a tube into any hollow organ, in current medical usage it refers only to the insertion of a tube into the trachea. In adults this tube generally bears a circumferential inflatable cuff which permits the tube to be sealed (relatively) tightly against the tracheal wall. This artificial airway may be connected to a machine which will either assist the individual in breathing or take over the work of breathing completely. For an intubated individual to speak clearly, the tube would either be placed improperly in the esophagus or be most extraordinarily defective (or, as some tracheostomy tubes, specially valved for speech and breathing assistance).

The story otherwise fascinating —memoirs of Alfred Nobel, so to speak.

Shawna, please try to repress your natural and healthy dislike of puns—somewhere in the world there must be *some* place to let them be broadcast . . . think of it as a sacred duty.

Robert M. Blondel, C.R.T.T.
(Certified Respiratory
Therapy Tech.)
Richmond, VA

Thank you, sir. Writers always (or, at any rate, should *always) be grateful for any bit of education that comes their way. I am grateful, too, for now I know that I was intubated last year. I no longer have to say, as I have been saying, that "I had a tube stuck in my throat."*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov, Ms. McCarthy, et.al.,

I am a new subscriber to your magazine and I'd like to tell you how much I enjoy it—but, too much praise can dull the wit, don't you think? So, I'll make it brief and get on to ripping your well-organized magazine to shreds.

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First, the stories: Good and better but not as good as I've been led to believe. I won't offer a suggestion for improvement for two reasons: I'm not a doer, I'm a bellyacher; and, if I did, it would go something like, "I can do better with my toes in the dark." Which is simply not true. All the authors are worthy of the title.

Second, the artwork: Expressive, impressive, and ingenious. Mooney's Module is a special delight. (Keep up the good work, Gerry!) Your mag not only shows that pictures are worth a thousand words, but includes those words for we otherwise dense readers. Keep in mind that all opinions expressed in this letter are entirely my own and pertain to no one else. (Unless, of course, someone dares to admit it.)

Third, the ads: Before you get all bent out of shape and on the defensive, I *know* ads are important because they pay for the mag. Amateur journalism has taught me that (if nothing else). The ads are in keeping with the general theme of your magazine and well laid out. (Grumble, grumble)

Now to the criticisms. . . . After all I have heard about the good Doctor's nit-witticisms, why do I not detect hide nor hair of the aforementioned puns? As a reader/writer who got straight A's in punsmanship (A for awful, that is), I really enjoy ripping-good word play now and then.

After reading your letters column (or should I say chapter?) I find a subtle reference on Dr. Asimov's part to the capacity for pretzel twisting this wonderful trash heap of a language we call English.

Don't get me wrong. I love English because of its detailed vagueness. In no other language can one say absolutely nothing while sounding profound, learned, creative, and even clever(?). Not French, which is very emotionally expressive and passionate. Not German, which is sometimes gruff, but musical when you overcome "English ear".

Oh, please! As a person who appreciates and joys in words (but is not above a little good-natured grammatical horseplay) I implore the Good Doctor (and even the Bad one, if he's listening) to use his talent for word yoga to its fullest potential! That's what I subscribed for! This is one reader who's not as think as you word-strict I am.

Sincerely (?),

Heather A. Plates
Garden Grove, CA, USA
(Earth, Solar system,
Milky Way, etc.)

Listen, for every one like you, there are a thousand tin-ears. What can one do? I was once asked to write a limited-edition book containing sixty limericks (clean), one based on each of the Sherlock Holmes short stories and novels. So I did. The publisher said, "What shall we call it?" and I said, "Call it 'Polmes for Holmes'." and he acted as though I had stabbed him with a rusty knife. It came out as "Asimov's Sherlockian Limericks."

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I've just finished reading my September issue of *IAsfm,* and I feel compelled to comment on your

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MICHAEL REAVES

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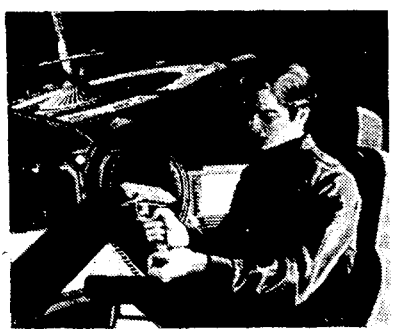
He will probably not live to make a third.



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reply to Mr. Andrew Poulos in the Letters section.

It's quite apparent that the view from Mount Olympus has clouded your perceptions. I suspect you feel your genius would have triumphed over all obstacles and you would have become successful without John Campbell's help. Perhaps. But it does not alter the fact that someone gave you advice, encouragement, and valuable feedback during your tentative beginnings. While you apparently feel the effect was negligible on your career, who can say for certain? The fact remains that lesser mortals than yourself still need these things and there are none left who will bother to help in even a minor way.

I submit to you, Dr. Asimov, that were you an unknown author trying to sell your Foundation Trilogy under present conditions, you would find your masterpiece rejected, and you wouldn't even know why. What does it have going for it? No sex, no nudity, very little violence, no rock 'em sock 'em action packed storyline, not even a single hero the 'masses' can identify with. A real loser. Back to the 'slush.' Even the "Beauteous Shawna" would reject your work, if what she chooses to print is any indication. After all, your stories are often heavily scientific, they make a point, and they have endings. Not Shawna's style at all! *Now* you are a 'NAME,' Dr. Asimov. *Now* you can get *anything* published. Your juvenile poetry in *Ellery Queen Magazine* and your George and Azazel stories spring readily to mind.

As for your editorial in the same issue, I agree that sex between human and robot probably would occur, but I must express my dismay that *you* felt compelled to use it in "Robots of Dawn". Sex has never been a part of your work (except when dealt with in a humorous vein), and as you are so inept at handling sex on a serious level, I can only assume you felt pressured to be more 'up to date' and 'with it'. Your love scenes seemed forced and had all the passion of a tongue depressor. They were a blot on an otherwise enjoyable book. Go with what you do best and let the lesser hacks peddle the sex. It also wouldn't hurt if you came down from the clouds once in a while to see how things could have been for you, but for the grace of John Campbell? Mr. Poulos' letter was polite, articulate, and made some valid criticisms. I felt your reply was pompous, arrogant, and abrupt. He deserved better from you.

Saundra L. Landis
Charlotte, NC

Gee, Miss Landis, how would you (or anyone) ever know about how Campbell helped me, if it wasn't that I talked about it all the time. That doesn't sound as though I thought the effect was negligible. Don't you think it's possible that he helped me because he saw possibilities in me? I assure you there weren't many he bothered with. So please calm down. No one can argue intelligently when blind with rage.
—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editors,

May I draw your attention to page 46 of your August issue.

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The "runaway greenhouse" described there by Stephen L. Gillet, Ph.D, is not very likely to lead to the Earth becoming a *duplicate* of Venus, since the atmosphere of Venus consists of CO_2 and is ninety times more massive than the atmosphere of Earth.

Whether a "runaway greenhouse" is possible at all can be easily ascertained by exposing a covered vessel to sunlight, putting some seawater in the bottom and using a transparent cover. You will find that when a limit vapor content (or "relative humidity") has been reached, further evaporation will stop.

V.N. Malinov
Haifa, Israel

Ah, but there's no lid on our atmosphere. Water vapor in the upper atmosphere can undergo photolysis by the Sun's ultraviolet and break up into hydrogen and oxygen. The hydrogen quickly escapes. Furthermore as temperature rises, the limestone in the Earth's crust breaks up to yield carbon dioxide. Thus carbon dioxide goes up, water goes down, oxygen reacts with minerals, and Earth's atmosphere would become very like Venus's atmosphere—if a runway greenhouse effect began.

—Isaac Asimov

Feudal Lords

The original medieval pbm game of economic development, military conquest, and political intrigue.

Feudal Lords is a computer-moderated play-by-mail strategic game of power politics set in Arthurian England.

Each player is lord of a medieval fiefdom seeking to be King against 14-or-less players and over 30 non-player lords controlled by the computer. To accomplish this task, a player selects from over 30 types of military, economic, and diplomatic orders each turn.

— The game is processed entirely by computer for fast, accurate, and impartial results.

— A two-page computer printout details each turn's economic results and reports all major battles fought.

— Armies may move by land or sea, limited only by the extent of their lord's political influence.

— Other features include random events, spies, vassals, trading, mercenaries, and more.

— Rated one of the four best pbm games as reviewed in issue #72 of the ***Dragon*** *magazine!*

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Dear Dr. Asimov:

I read with interest your comments on what an "editorial" is, and I must agree that your definition is acceptable. However, your explanation of your choice of subject is misleading. You may well "believe" that it is (or "should be") of interest to your reader, but what you ignore in this discussion is that the topic is always ISAAC AZIMOV—no, not just the OPINIONS of Isaac Azimov, but the man himself or his writings.

I have only been reading these for a little over a year, but every one that I have read—be it "My Projects," or autographs, or the history, spelling, and pronunciation of your name, or the photographs of science fiction writers, or recovering from a heart operation or this one on sex in "The Robots of

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Dawn"—centers on the persona or the writings of Isaac Asimov.

I recommend an addition to your definition. Following the statement ". . . of interest to his readers." add the following: "and which will further enhance the aura, reputation, myth, and book sales of Isaac Azimov."

Calvin Quayle
Eau Claire, WI

I'm always glad to publish a letter that does nothing but talk about me. Including the address and salutation, you mention my name no less than six times, spelling it with an "s" three times and a "z" three times. Can't you make up your mind, Mr. Kwale?

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. A:

I've just discovered why magazines of your construction have been given the common term "pulps" . . .

Just get one wet.

Ah, alas, Lucius Shepard, Kit Reed, Norman Spinrad, and your gentle self are all mingled in ink and wood product, it looks like, forever.

Well . . . onto the August issue.

Will Citta
Estes Park, CO

How did you get it wet?

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Ms. McCarthy,

Heretofore I have followed the various editorial debates in the Letters column with interest but without desire to join in. However, Dr. Asimov's response to Marcia Backos' letter (August 1984) regarding the amount of sex in the stories raised my literary hackles. I *am not* addressing the issue of sex in the stories but Dr. Asimov's response: "Sex is part of the human condition and in contemporary literature it simply cannot be ignored" raises some questions. First, why not? Those who wish to keep sex in the bedroom can still find fine contemporary literature which eschews sex as a factor or which treats it indirectly, leaving the details to the imagination. Additionally, there are many aspects of the human condition which are ignored in literature. I could write a detailed story on the scatologic implications of toilet training in some brave new world of the future, but I don't believe that most editors of science fiction would find it worthy of inclusion in their publications.

You the editor must decide whether your magazine will follow or set the trends for science fiction writing; there is no nebulous force telling you what you can and cannot ignore. In closing, I might add that science fiction is still struggling for a spot on the *literature* shelves; gratuitous sex will keep it off.

Sincerely yours,

Nancy M. Athey
Baltimore, MD

You're perfectly right. There are many fine novels (including mine) that don't deal much with sex. On the other hand, many writers want to deal with this important aspect of life, and many readers want to read about it. The only way you can stop them is by passing censorship laws and enforcing them. Personally, I consider censorship an intolerable evil and an insult to the intelligence of humanity.

—Isaac Asimov

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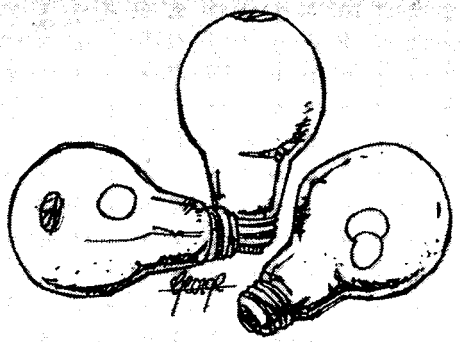

AND THANK YOU, TOMMY EDISON

(All Your Lamps *Are* Magic)

Among marvels that we have grown used to and no longer sing a proper praise to,
I would hold high this white hull of glass, little more to the eye
than an egg in my hand; orb that sports a whorled, tapered end—
But, in a place made to take it (let's call this a socket), install it! right-turn it! then
SEE!! how two magic-points joined by these turnings will set the wonder-fire burning
in a most versatile eggful of Light! (Always, I mean, if it's a sound one,
deftly handled with care, its fragility respected and all those "avg. lumens" directed
through a lamp to make Light of your Dark.) Say! if I didn't know all about
this (I mean, superficially all about this), I'd most seriously consider wizards'
spells, and on wonder beheld a great deal I'd ponder each-and-every
time that *I* changed my light bulbs. (Yes! and right roundly query how all those
not-going-anywhere, jammed, crammed, static, trapped, beautiful, potential bright light-
years got in there. ANYHOW!?) But now I just yell OH NO! NOT again!
Why doesn't SOMEone—? why do I always have to—? ANYone can, SURELY!
screw a bulb in—wonder why the old soft-white—? . . . Calmer after the changing,
I'll toss "the light that failed" unceremoniously to its *POP*! down my trash
slot and (Menlo Park not thought) settle back to munch a bunch, grab a read,
or ear-up some hit tunes. Really neat, though, and certainly must rank as
one of Science's brighter gains, something Stone Age man most assuredly would have
had VERY great use for at his pad—torch-beaming those drab cave scenes. THANX, TOM!

—David R. Bunch

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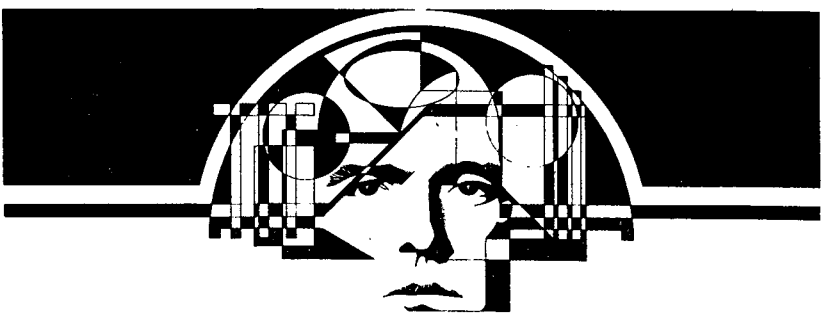
MARTIN GARDNER

RELATIVISTICALLY SPEAKING



"The Captain tells me you're having trouble with relativity theory," said Lieutenant Flarp to Ensign Pulver. The two officers were chatting over cups of coffee in the cafeteria of the spaceship *Bagel*.

"You hear right," sighed Pulver. "The Old Man says he won't recommend my advancement in rank until I pass my test on the special theory of relativity."

"Any particular problems? Maybe I can help."

Pulver put down his cup and opened a new pack of Marsborough cigarettes. Made from choice tobacco cultivated on Mars, they came in bright red packages of 50 thin cigarettes to a box. "I keep thinking of situations I can't understand. It seems to me they violate the theory."

"Such as?"

"Well, suppose I'm standing on a planet and two spaceships go by directly overhead in opposite directions. Each ship is moving, say, at three-fourths the speed of light. Won't they pass each other with one-and-one-half times the speed of light?"

"They will."

"But doesn't relativity theory say that no object can pass another with a speed faster than light?"

"It does indeed," said Flarp, "but that applies only to observers on the objects. From your fixed frame of reference on the planet you'd see the ships go past each other with relative speeds greater than light. But if you're on one of the ships it's a different story. You'd have to consider

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the changes in length and time that occur when relative speeds are high."

"Is there a formula for that?"

"There is," said Flarp, "and a very simple one. In Newtonian physics you would of course merely add the velocities of the two ships. But in relativity theory velocities are not additive. If one ship goes in one direction with velocity x and the other goes the opposite way with velocity y, the passing speed for an observer on either ship isn't x plus y. It's x plus y divided by 1 plus xy over c squared, where c is the speed of light."

Pulver put down his box of cigarettes and inked the following formula on a paper napkin:

$$\frac{x + y}{1 + \frac{xy}{c^2}}$$

For x he substituted $3c/4$ (three fourths the speed of light), and the same for y. It took only a few minutes to see that when the formula is reduced, the c^2 terms cancel out, giving $24c/25$ or 24/25ths the speed of light for the passing velocity of the two ships.

"Beautiful!" exclaimed Pulver. "I had no idea the calculation was so easy. Let me ask you something else. Imagine an enormous pair of scissors in space. Its blades are as long as the diameter of the solar system. Now suppose the blades slowly start to close. The spot where their cutting edges intersect will move toward the points of the scissors with a speed that keeps getting faster. Wouldn't the velocity of that crossing point, relative to me, soon exceed that of light?"

"It would," said Flarp. "But I'm sure you realize that only a geometrical point is moving, not a material object. Relativity theory allows all sorts of things to go faster than light. You can move a beam of light inside a dark room and make the spot on the wall go faster than light."

"I understand that," said Pulver, "but what troubles me is this. Suppose the handles of the scissors are on earth and the spot where the edges cross is at Pluto. Couldn't we wiggle the handles to make the intersection point jiggle back and forth, and send a coded message to Pluto that would travel faster than light? I may be wrong, but doesn't relativity theory absolutely prohibit sending messages at speeds faster than light?"

"It certainly does," said Flarp. He then proceeded to explain why the giant scissors couldn't be used for faster-than-light signaling. If you can't figure it out, turn to page 95.

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GAMING

by Dana Lombardy

Here's the second and final part of our survey of play-by-mail (PBM) games. Over fifty companies were contacted, and nearly two-thirds of them responded.

The second half of the list of these companies and their games is presented at the end of this column. To give you a better idea of what PBM games are like, here are a few examples.

Adventures By Mail (Box 424, Cohoes, NY 12047) offers a bi-monthly newsletter free to its players. ABM's open-ended SF game *Beyond the Stellar Empire,* which won several awards, is human-moderated with computer assistance. In this game, you and an unlimited number of other players each role-play the part of a captain of a starship. The referees interact with the players, so the universe is constantly changing. It costs $18.00 for the rules, set-up, and first two turns, then $4.00 per turn after that. There may be extra costs per turn if you attack ($3.00), defend ($1.50), or have an expanded turn ($2.00).

Entertainment Concepts Inc. (6923 Pleasant Dr., Charlotte, NC 28211) sends a monthly newsletter free to players. The official PBM version of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons®* is human-moderated with computer assistance for combat and information on the large "world" ECI created. You can take one Hero position (a character of level 1-5 experience), or a Fellowship position (four different characters of levels 1-2 experience) to start your fantasy adventuring. Having the *AD&D®* rules helps, but is not vital to play this PBM version of the game. Cost is $10.00 for the first position, $5.00 for additional positions (includes rules and set-up). After that, each turn is $4.00.

Flying Buffalo Inc. (Box 1467, Scottsdale, AZ 85252) offers a quarterly newsletter to players for $6.00 a year subscription. *Starweb,* a computer-moderated strategic SF design, is their best-known PBM game. You can play a merchant, pirate, berserker, empire builder, etc., while attempting to be the first player to reach 10,000 victory points. Diplomacy with the other players is important. *Starweb* costs $12.00 for rules and set-up, $3.50 per turn thereafter, with an increase of 50* per turn after every 10 turns of play.

Game Systems Inc. (Box 431166, Miami, FL 33243) has a monthly newsletter available for $15.00 a year subscription. *Dawn of the Ancients* is their newest PBM game. It's a strategic-level contest for 12 players set in ancient history. You play the ruler of Rome, Egypt, Greece, etc., and try to be the first to acquire 100 victory points through colonization and increasing use of natural resources. The computer plays an enemy to all players—Atlantis. It costs $10.00 for rules, set-up, and

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THE BEST IN PBM

BEYOND THE STELLAR EMPIRE

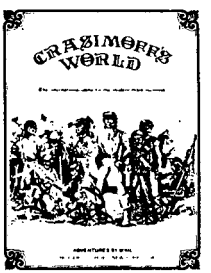
Beyond the Stellar Empire (BSE) is a science fiction role-playing game of unparalleled scope. You assume the persona of an interstellar starship captain interacting in the most detailed play-by-mail game ever created. BSE has it all; a multitude of unique solar systems composed of individually designed worlds, politics, and diplomacy, realistic economics and logistics, a comprehensive combat system, chartered companies and Imperial services, alien races, and exploration, invasion, and colonization of hostile planets.

TOP PBM GAME of 1983 and 1984

Beyond the Stellar Empire was chosen by editors of *GAMES* magazine as one of the top 100 games for both 1983 and 1984, the only PBM game so honored.

Complete Rules Package costs $5.00. Starter Package costs $17.00 and includes rules package, set-up, and two turns.

CRASIMOFF'S WORLD



Crasimoff's World is a PBM game of extraordinary quality and detail. Lead your party of fighters, magic users and priests through a fantastic land filled with adventure, magic, and danger. Each party member has a wide range of attributes and possessions. Loot dungeons, redeem swampmen heads for bounty, explore ancient ruins, raid dwarven encampments, and battle hill trolls in their underground domain. The world is complete in every detail; history, ecology, mythos, geography, and much, much more.

Complete Rules Package costs $3.00. Starter Package costs $15. -includes rules package, set-up, and two turns.

CAPITOL

Capitol is a fast playing strategic space warfare game that divides players into teams, pitting them against each other in an orgy of xenophobic fury. Capitol is unique in that it is a perfect introductory game for an individual new to play-by-mail games while at the same time detailed enough for the most experienced gamer.

Complete Rules Package costs $2.50. Starter Package costs $16.00 and includes rules package, set-up, and four turns.

Adventures By Mail has processed over 100,000 turns

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first two turns, then $3.00 per turn thereafter.

Graaf Simulations (27530 Harper Avenue, St. Clair Shores, MI 48081) has the computer-moderated game *Feudal Lords*. The game is set in England at the time of King Arthur's death, with each of 10 to 15 players controlling a fiefdom. The goal is to become the new king, and diplomacy is crucial. Cost is $10.00 for rules, set-up, and first three turns, then $2.50 per turn thereafter.

Pierce & Co. (Box 25675, Chicago, IL 60625) has a wide-open SF game for 13 players, called *Galactic Confusion*. It's human-moderated with computer assistance, and is somewhat complex. You can be one of 10 distinctly different alien character types, each of which has a different goal for victory (not known to the other players). The game ends as soon as one player achieves his objective. It costs $3.00 for rules and set-up, and $3.00 per turn thereafter.

Jabberwock Enterprises Inc., Box 158, Somers, CT 06071. *Crater War* tactical SF game.

Dan Lambert, 9602 South Felton Ave., Inglewood, CA 90301. *Other-Earth* fantasy role-game, and *After the Fire* post-holocaust SF game.

Mobius Games, Box 8625, Scottsdale, AZ 85252. *Mobius-I* strategic SF exploration and conquest game.

Phoenix Publications, Drawer 280237, Dallas, TX 75228. *Galac-Tac* SF conquest game, and *Warlord* strategic fantasy game.

Pierce & Company, Box 25675, Chicago, IL 60625. *Galactic Confusion* and *Peacemaker-Peacebreaker* SF strategy games.

The Round Table, Box 126, Cornish, ME 04020. *Court of Kings* medieval role-game.

Schubel & Son Inc., Box 214848, Sacramento, CA 95821. *Arena Combat, The Tribes of Crane,* and *Catacombs of Chaos* fantasy games, *Star-Master, Alien Conflict, Star Venture,* and *Horizons End!* SF games.

Stardragon, Box 201, Chincoteague, VA 23336. *Stardragon* SF strategy game.

Superior Simulations, Box 505, Fairfield, ID 83327. *Empyrean Challenge* and *Maxi-Challenge* SF strategy.

Mike Williams, Route 4, Box 802, LaFollette, TN 37766. *Darkworld* strategy game, mixing SF and fantasy.

World Campaign, Box 321, Epping, NH 03042. *World Campaigns IV* global wargame.

Zorph Enterprises, 3646 Gibsonia Road, Gibsonia, PA 15044. *Quest of the Great Jewels* fantasy wargame, and *Zorphwar* tactical SF game.

For a free pamphlet with more information on these PBM games, write to Dana Lombardy, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, 380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017. ●

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THE LAND OF OSIRIS

art: J.K. Potter

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Translated from the German by Sally Schiller

I have seen the past.
I know the future.
—Tutankhamen

The author, who lives near Heidelberg, has had an extensive career in German publishing. He is currently the science fiction and fantasy editor at the Wilhelm Heyne company, and he has edited over 40 anthologies. Mr. Jeschke's novel, *The Last Day of Creation,* was recently published by St. Martin's Press.

by Wolfgang Jeschke

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1
MASTER JACK

He came down the Shari River from the south out of the country of the Lagones and Bagirmi. He had three horses with him, two of which he used as pack animals. He rode the third himself, a small brown mare with a white blaze and dark brown eyes, a beautiful horse.

It was on the day of the feast of Id El Kebir, the Bairam. I remember it as if it were yesterday—a hot morning—there was the smell of warm blood and entrails, of freshly baked bread. That morning rams had been slaughtered in front of all the houses—even before the huts of the poor. The king, Allah be praised, had animals distributed to them for slaughter, so that no one in the town would be without his roast for the Easter celebration. The men had already begun to drink Laqbi early in the morning. They were lighthearted and merry and some of them were even slightly inebriated. Then news came that a stranger had ridden through the southern gate of the town.

Annur, the barber, brought the news. In spite of the heat, he had his melefa slung tightly around his shoulders. His toothless smile froze into a grimace. He rubbed his long nose and his small eyes—lively from curiosity and Laqbi—sparkled in his brown wrinkled face under his bleached tarbusch that had once been red. "So, so, one of light skin," my father said slowly, laying his knife and the bloody liver beside the head of the ram on the bench in front of our hut. He cleaned his hands on the blood spattered apron, which he had put on over his burnoose, wiping the sweat off his brow with his arm. "A travelling doctor?"

"Not a Tabib," Annur said and looked with the eye of an expert at our ram. "He says that he is a man of learning, a sort of stargazer."

"Stargazer?"

The barber shrugged and snorted. "At any rate, he comes from somewhere way down south, somewhere where there are not only blacks. In former times, whites are said to have lived there." Annur sniffed in disgust and spat on the freshly swept clay floor in front of our hut. My father looked at him sternly. "One thing is certain, he's an unbeliever," he continued scornfully, without even noticing our disapproval. "Were Hassan in power—pah—such so-called scholars would have been forbidden entry into our town or would have had their heads chopped off and nailed to the city gate as a warning to all."

"That is not the way to talk during our Easter celebration," my father reprimanded. "The times of Hassan in which every light-skinned man was stoned or hanged, whether he was a mutant or not, are past—Allah be thanked. King Ahmed ben Brahim is a good ruler. He gave me this fat ram as a present."

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"Truly a fine animal," the barber had to admit with a touch of envy, as he belonged to those who had enough money to buy their own ram.

"Where is the stranger, Annur?" I asked curiously as I had never seen a white adult before.

"He's staying in the caravansary and has been brought to the king's palace by the guards of the city." Then he turned to my father and said, "According to a discreet, preliminary examination, he doesn't seem to be a mutant. When he comes out of the palace we will know more." Then with a touch of doubt in his voice, he said, "Maybe, he is really telling the truth—perhaps he does come from the south and not from the countries of the dead in the north. We'll know in time. One thing is certain, he's an unbeliever." This time my father caught him with a reproachful look before he could spit on the floor. The barber pressed his lips to a thin line and made do with repeating sharply, "One thing is certain!"

I ran in the direction of the caravansary in order to see the mysterious stranger. The sun was bright in the yard. The first things I saw were the saddles and packs near the stalls. Hazaz sat on a mat made of palm leaves in the shade and was mending a camel saddle. One would never have thought that such powerful hands could make such adept and quick movements. He stuck holes in the worn leather with an awl. He waved to me and rubbed his crocheted cotton Taqija which he always kept on his shaven head.

Abarshi and Sliman, the most famous vagabonds in town, crouched behind the packs of the stranger, pulled as if unintentionally on the straps and buckles and blinked to emphasize their boredom into the sun.

"Hands off!" Hazaz snarled without taking the tarred string from between his teeth.

"He's a white devil," Abarshi said as an excuse. "Who knows what kind of diseases he's brought with him!" One eye clouded with cataract stared accusingly at the dusty leather cases of the stranger as if it hoped to divine their contents with some hidden power, while the other eye glanced covetously around.

"All the more reason to keep your hands off!" Hazaz replied, pulling the string through the holes and hammering it into place with the wooden handle of the awl.

"Beware of the beast that arrives from the north, says the prophet. He is ill and carries with him slow invisible death," Sliman proclaimed with a dark frown, stroking his white beard which hung like plucked cotton around his chin. He looked so wise that he seemed about to turn into a marabout.

"The prophet never said anything of the sort, you cunning bastard," Hazaz replied. "It was one of those drivelling preachers, who visit us year after year, poisoning the souls of our people while draining the last

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penny out of their pockets. Besides, the stranger doesn't come from the north, but from the south."

"The devil has many dwellings, says the prophet," Sliman replied, uneasily balancing the weight of his bleached blue turban on his head. "Allah's wrath will crush those who disobey his laws just as the crocodile whip crushes the scorpion who raises its sting."

"Then take care, Sliman; if you don't keep your poisonous tongue still, you'll be mistaken for a scorpion." Sliman fumed with rage and crouched down beside Abarshi in the shade. The noise of the crickets in the palm trees of the caravansary was like a persistent metallic shriek. Somewhere, under the roof of the stalls, pigeons cooed and we could hear the breathing of the stranger's horses.

"Beschir?" Hazaz asked, "have you done your good deed for the day on this holiest of all days?"

I looked at him sceptically as I had no idea just what he was trying to get at. "No," I said hesitantly.

"Then feed the horses. I have given them water."

"What's his name?" I asked.

"Jack Freyman. He's called Master Jack."

I went into the kitchen and put on the tea. Then I gave the horses millet and hay and brushed them down. Ticks had nested in their hide and their legs were covered with leech wounds, like all the animals coming from the humid hot south.

A clatter of hooves was heard and we rushed out to the yard. A royal escort, the vizier himself, was accompanying the stranger. The vizier rode at the stranger's side under a canopy held by four slaves flanked by six cavalrymen of the king's guard in full armor riding horses with blue quilted armor, the slit toes of their curly pointed-toed shoes hooked into the stirrups. The visors of their helmets glittered in rivalry with the silver harnesses and the polished brass plates at the heads and necks of the horses. They made a magnificent sight.

I was disappointed by the stranger's appearance. I had seen light-skinned ones before, young eunuch slaves such as the barbarians make of the healthy children of the refugees. But this man's skin was almost as dark as that of a Tuareg. He was of medium height and strongly built. He looked more like a merchant from the west, with his black turban which hid his hair and his black beard. However, when he rode nearer and got down from his saddle I noticed that his eyes were as blue as the waters of an oasis reflecting the midday sun.

The cavalrymen loosened their shoes from the stirrups, sprang down from their horses and thrust their spears into the dust of the caravansary. I recognized one of them called Chalilu. He lived not far from us, but didn't seem to recognize me and stared straight ahead. Perspiration ran

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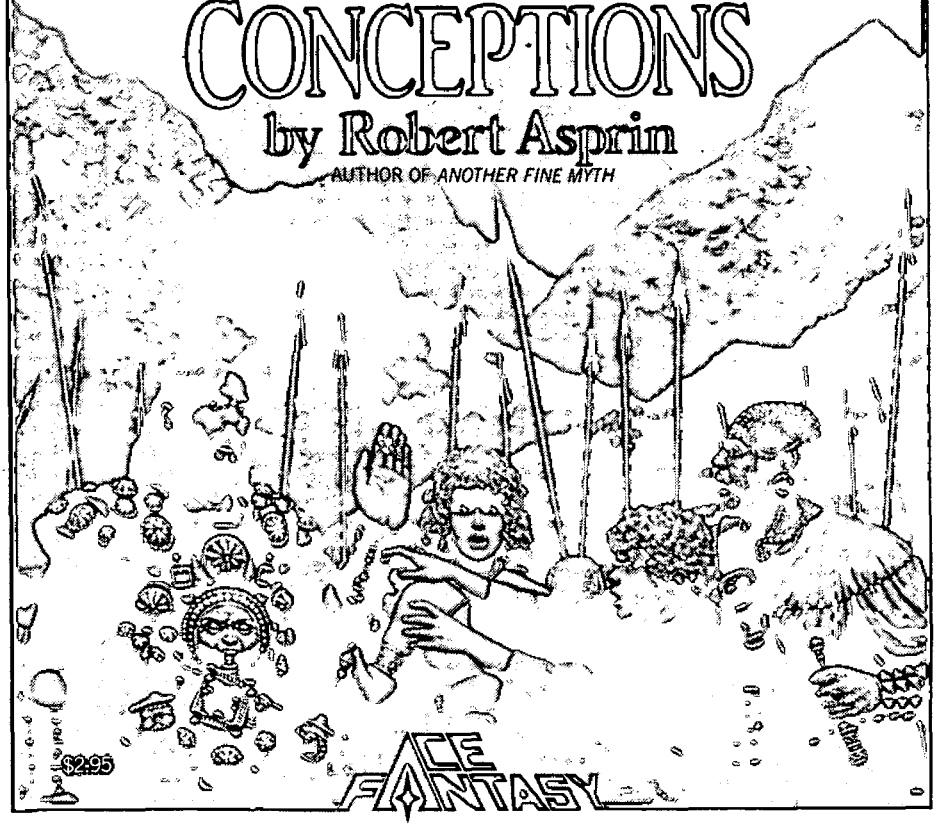

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down his face from under his helmet, down onto the thick cotton armor. His round face, instead of registering the worthiness of his station, bore the expression of an imbecile.

Hazaz bowed before the Vizier, who took out an official document and began to read it aloud.

"By order of his Majesty, the King, our Master, Jack Freyman Effendi, travelling scholar from the far off country of Zimbabwe and guest of our King is to receive a Bishari riding camel from his Majesty's herd as well as three pack animals of our best breed. Further, to accompany him to Darfur and to protect and to serve him, he is to receive a guide familiar with the route and a camel herder. These men will also receive the appropriate riding animals from the King's herd. Further, he shall receive the following provisions for forty days from the stock of the caravansary: dates 40 pounds, millet 30 pounds, sugar 6 pounds, tea 5 pounds and salt 2 pounds . . ."

I looked the stranger over. He was wearing a white tunic such as is worn in the south and unusually cut trousers of light grey cloth, held up by a belt in which two knives were fastened, and falling over low boots of shiny leather. On a shoulder strap, he carried a quiver of short metal arrows. As he dismounted, he took a weapon from his saddle horn. It looked like a cross between a short-barreled gun and a bow. I found out later that it was called a crossbow and that one could shoot more accurately with it than with many a gun.

As he turned his face towards me, I saw that his black beard was greying on the cheeks and at the corners of his mouth. His face seemed young. How old could he be? Forty or even older?

"Master Jack Effendi?" I said.

He hesitated and looked at me with a critical glance. "Yes?" he asked.

"Give me your horse. I'll look after it."

He handed me the reins.

And so it happened that Hazaz was chosen by the King himself to show Master Jack the way to the east and I, as I had often accompanied Hazaz as his camel herder, was allowed to follow him this time too. What a journey this would be! It would lead us through the land of the dead to the very edge of the world—and Master Jack beyond it.

Extracts from the Journal of Master Jack

March 29th, 2036

We have just reached Kotoko on Lake Chad. The brothers of Fort Sibut were right. It is mortal danger for a white man to let himself be seen north of the Niger River. However, it's no different south of the Zambezi. But

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how could one hold it against the people? The white race has destroyed its own world—brought itself to a spectacular end. The fact that they took countless other races to their deaths in the process and brought them unspeakable misery doesn't interest these people in the least. Should I expect gratitude?

In spite of this, I meet people everywhere with whom one can talk quite reasonably—chiefs, tribal princes, rulers—more sensible and wiser perhaps than the politicians and rulers of our race who were only capable of presenting one another with an expensive cremation.

King Ahmed ben Brahim is about my age. He has a natural dignity—a sense of humor—and is quick to understand. He asked me about my itinerary and I showed him the way on my map from Mt. Darwin to the north into the former Zambia, down the Lualaba and the Congo, up the Ubangi and the Tomi past the ruins of Dekoa and Fort Lamy and down the Shari—the great western detour round the countries of the dead. He laid his hand on my map, on the point between Juba and Djibouti, between Asmara and Lake Victoria, where the bombs had fallen in the struggle for the horn of Africa.

He noticed at once that on the old map Lake Chad was shown larger than it is today. The latest satellite pictures show that the desert has extended even further to the south. I can confirm this. The king has just told me that the old caravan route to the Nile can only be covered with camels today. There is not enough water for horses. Only three centuries ago ox teams travelled through this old caravan route. I made him a present of a burning glass—these lenses are called Zimbabwe glasses here and are highly valued. I offered him my horses. He promised me his support, indicated he would allow me to use his camels and provisions and even offered me the prospect of a guide and a herder. He has already found a guide. His name is Hazaz, a big strong Nubian. He seems prudent and experienced and seems very reliable. His herder is a young boy called Beschir. He's quick-witted and intelligent and has a good hand with animals, but he is delicate, a bit small for his fourteen years, with sad dark eyes that reveal a sensitive character.

Here nothing is known about conditions on the Nile, except, at best, pilgrims' fables at second and third hand. Tales of horrible mutants, men with bodies of insects, heads of birds and white cannibals.

The day before our journey started, I rode to the northwest to the lake where the king's herd grazed. The king's blacksmith was also there. The

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camels were being shod. Two slaves held a grumbling, snarling animal while the smith pressed its hooves against his loin cloth. He nailed Bu Raqaba, the strong hide of the sabre-horned antelope, to the animal's hooves. It was known to resist the rocks and sand of the desert better than steel. He laughed in relief when he had finished and poured the leather pail full of water over himself.

That night I led the animals, rebellious with restlessness, into the town, where they were to be saddled and loaded before sunrise.

Thus, it came to pass that we rode away from Kotoko towards the east through the land of the light-skinned Dagama on our way to the great contaminated river and to the ocean beyond the desert, to the holy city that had risen from the dead, over which Allah holds his protective hand.

Extracts from the Journal of Master Jack

April 8th, 2036

At last we are on our way. The king has kept his promise. Well-equipped with animals and provisions, we are setting off for the east, following the old pilgrim route which once crossed Darfur through Kordofan to Khartoum and from there on to Port Sudan. The names of these places are unknown to all here today. Has the route changed perhaps?

It is said that there are pilgrims who maintain that they were in Arabia after the oil war. Mecca had been rebuilt, at least the holy places. I mistrust their reports. I don't dare bring up the subject otherwise for it arouses a religious fanaticism that frightens me.

In spite of all this, I am confident.

We rode through many abandoned villages and rested at dried-up springs. We crossed the sandy remains of the Lake of Fittri, in the land of the Bathra tribe. The lake looks like a mirror that has broken into smithereens, but this is only the layer of salt covering the clay earth that has cracked from the heat and glistens in the sun. Our camels left deep tracks. The air was damp and stifling and the camels snorted with fear. Islands seemed to float over the horizon to accompany us soundlessly along our route.

We detoured round the ruins of Abéché where there are supposed to be strange beasts and horrible pale mutants who know how to make themselves invisible. They are said to strangle travellers at night.

On the twenty-eighth day of our journey we reached the foot of the mountain and rushed to the spring called Bir Meschru, the Spring of the

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Skeletons. Many are said to have mysteriously died there. But that too is a lie. Just half an hour's ride from the spring, there is a place to the north, between isolated tamarisks and shittah trees, where there are hundreds of dead bodies. It is quite evident that they had not met with a mysterious death, but had been cruelly massacred. Few of them had become skeletons; most had mummified in the dry air and had become feather-light, rolling over in the wind. Although the sun had darkened their skin, it was obvious that they were white refugees that had been slaughtered. All their clothes had been stolen.

We rode back to the oasis and were all very depressed. The otherwise happy face of Master Jack had never been so earnest.

In the meantime, back at the spring, a second caravan had arrived and had set up its camp under the palm trees. There were two travellers with four camels, pilgrims from the west far beyond Timbuktu, on their way to the holy places. They begged us for tea and sugar. I was sure that they were from the Logon tribe from the cut of their faces and their clothes. I didn't believe a word they said, for the Logons are deceitful and covetous and are said to be magicians with the Evil Eye, who can change into hyenas in the night. They camped a stone's throw away from us.

The water of the spring was somewhat salty and tasted of sulphur. However, this was the richest source of water for many miles and our camels needed a rest. Thus, it was decided to rest for two nights and one day.

Extracts from the Journal of Master Jack

May 5th, 2036

We must have passed the former boundary between Chad and the Sudan long ago. As far as I can make out El Geneina doesn't exist any more. The mountain range to the east must be the Jebel Musa. Now, the caravan route leads up into the mountains. The way before us is difficult. Hazaz assures me that it can only be a three-day journey to El Fasher, the former caravan junction in Darfur. From there it will take us 30 days to En Nahud in Darhamar, another 7 or 8 days to El Obeid in Kordofan and then Khartoum will be within reasonable distance. Only two months if our journey continues so successfully. But who knows what perils await us? I have seen thousands today who once believed themselves fortunate. They had fled contaminated Europe and had succeeded in their flight across the Mediterranean. They had encountered unspeakable hardships in crossing the desert—were led by deceitful caravan guides into a supposedly safe place that turned out to be a trap and there they were slain. These horrors actually happened. I have seen these "mutants' graveyards,"

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as they call them, with my own eyes. The robbers and murderers even went about their horrible business with the approval of their governments, in order to prevent the plague resulting from biological warfare advancing further to the south, as it had completely depopulated the whole of the northern strip of Africa. The military was often put into action to shoot down the streams of refugees. What they didn't realize was that migratory birds had already carried the plague into the areas of the south—which abound in water—yes, even into the heart of Africa and that they returned with it every fall.

2
THE LABYRINTH

It clouded over that night, but there was hardly a drop in temperature. I dreamt of the dead in the desert that the wind had set into motion. There had been children among them.

Some time or other in the night I awoke. Hazaz had put wood on the fire again and cowered in the darkness of the night. Today I know that he was then as conscious as I that something was wrong. The Logon tribe had taken on another form and were sniffing us out.

In the morning, fog covered the oasis and the sun was lost to view. I had a hard time finding the animals and herding them together. They had diarrhea from the sulphurous water and their hides were damp from the fog. We crouched in silence around the fire and drank tea.

Master Jack went over to the pilgrims and spoke with them for a long time while Hazaz and I rearranged the packs on the animals and checked the saddles and their straps and put them in order.

Although it was the beginning of May, the wind came from the south and the suffocating heat became unbearable. It strained our hearts and hindered our breathing, making us at the same time exhausted and restless. The atmosphere was crackling and deceptive. Distance had no meaning. The mountains appeared nearer. The hours dragged on. Threatening clouds were gathering in the southeast.

"Herd the animals together, Beschir," Hazaz said. "A storm is coming."

Master Jack came back just as we were putting up our tent and securing it. "There's going to be a thunderstorm," he called and, as if the heavens wanted to prove their point, a sharp crack of thunder echoed from the mountains nearby. The animals sought shelter under the sparsely growing siwak bushes. The sky darkened visibly. The wind throbbed in the acacia trees and the dry palm branches hissed like disturbed snakes. However, the storm made its way past us to the north. There, in the mountains, deep red lightning flashed and ripples of thun-

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der were heard for a long time, while in the south, the stars began appearing one by one. Nearby hyenas were laughing. Shortly after, I must have fallen sleep.

I awoke to a scream. Before I could get to my feet, Master Jack was up, had grabbed his crossbow and quiver, and run out. I ran after him. My riding camel was only a few feet away and was no longer tethered. It seemed out of breath as if it had been chased around. It stretched its neck and sniffed. In the leaden-colored light of the dawn, I discovered a second camel just a few yards away plucking at the branches with its hard lips and snorting excitedly. It was Master Jack's camel. It had its hobble on, binding its forefoot to the leg. The other animals were nowhere to be seen.

"This way, Beschir!" I heard Master Jack call. He crouched beside Hazaz on the ground. I couldn't see what had happened. I grabbed my camel by its reins and dragged it behind me. As I drew nearer I saw that the left side and sleeve of Hazaz's garment was dark with blood. It was the most horrible wound I had ever seen in my life! It gaped open three or four fingers wide, not bleeding. One could see the white of the bone.

I heard a deep sobbing that sounded like a foolish bleat. I was very much ashamed when I realized that the sound was coming from my own throat. But I couldn't help it. I sat down in the sand, as I could no longer stand up.

"I surprised them," Hazaz whispered, clenching his teeth. "Those jackals! Those sons of bitches . . ."

"Keep still!" Master Jack ordered. He pressed the wound together. "You should have woken us. You should never have acted on your own!"

With a throbbing cry, Hazaz buried his face in his right arm and lay on his stomach in the sand.

"Come here and help me, boy!" Master Jack's voice aroused me from my stupor. I felt the sweat break out on my neck and freeze in the cool of the morning. My whole body trembled as I helped to dress the wound with cloth from Master Jack's saddle bag and to splint the arm with a piece of wood.

"Don't bother about me!" Hazaz moaned. "Catch up with them. They won't get far. Not with my camel. It will put up a fight. But the pack animals . . ."

"Was this done with the stroke of a sword?" Master Jack asked.

"It was a shangormango," Hazaz snarled. "Thrown from not even ten feet away—the jackal wanted to throw it into my face. At the last minute, I shielded my face with my arm."

We carried him carefully to our pack saddles. We made him a comfortable bed under a tamarisk tree. The sun was rising as we saddled our camels.

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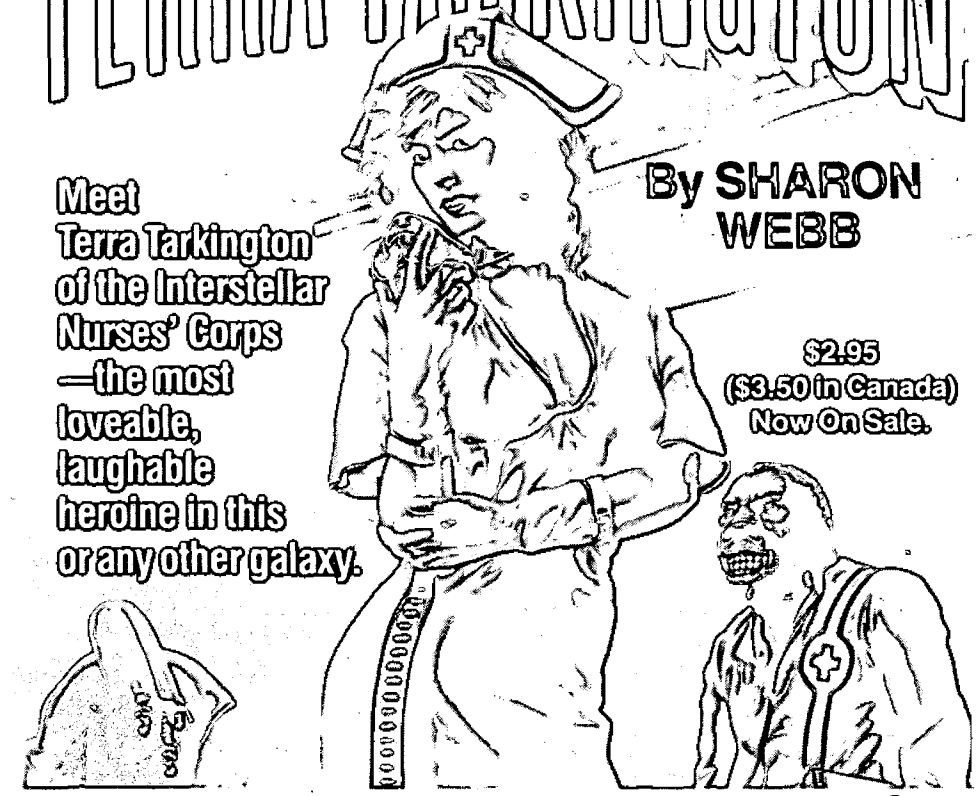

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"What is a shangormango?" Master Jack asked as we looked for tracks. I wished I had been given the eyesight of Hazaz.

"A throwing iron," I said. "Some are very adept with them. They can decapitate a man at a distance of thirty feet or slit the legs off a gazelle at fifty feet."

Hazaz was right. His camel had resisted stubbornly. Its tracks were easy to recognize. When the two scoundrels saw us coming, they tried to get away on foot in different directions, knowing full well that even in the saddle they wouldn't have a chance against our swift riding camels. Their plan had failed the moment Hazaz prevented them from taking all the animals. Had they fled at that moment with their own animals, they would have perhaps been able to get away. But their greed got the better of them. These men were not robbers, but petty scoundrels, and stupid ones at that.

We set off after one of them and Master Jack soon rode him down. He let out a pitiful whimper and crawled towards me on all fours, perhaps hoping I would be more merciful. Master Jack handed me his crossbow and I took aim and crooked my finger round the trigger, when suddenly all anger and bitterness left me. I was filled with a great sadness and loathing for the pitiable creature lying face down before me. He crawled towards me like a misshapen lizard, stretched out like my own shadow. I just couldn't do it. I remembered the horrible wound. I just couldn't do it. Master Jack took the crossbow from me, unstrung it and hung it on his saddle.

"Listen!" he said to the man. "We are going to take your animals as we have a wounded man to transport. As long as we are at the watering place, keep away! Should you dare to come anyway, I'll shoot you both!" Then he turned his camel around and we rode away.

The whimpering behind us turned into a great lamentation. The further away we rode, the angrier and nastier it became—directed, of course, at Master Jack's light skin and his race. I looked at Master Jack, but he didn't look back, took no notice at all. Perhaps he didn't understand. We herded the animals together, our own and theirs, and rode back to the oasis.

I was at odds with myself. Master Jack had been allowed by circumstance to see into my very heart. Was it the heart of a coward incapable of revenging his friend? As if he had heard my innermost thoughts, he said, "You did the right thing, Beschir. His life is useless. His death would have been no less useless."

I looked at him helplessly, but he smiled and nodded encouragingly. I pulled myself together and knew at that moment that I would follow this man to the very edge of the world. And I swore to myself to do so, come what may.

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It was midday when we returned to the oasis. We noticed from afar that another caravan had arrived. We were frightened and expected to find Hazaz dead and our packs and provisions plundered. It would have been easy booty, but we were lucky. They were merchants from Darfur on their way to the west. They had looked after Hazaz and had given him something to drink. They told us that they couldn't understand what he was talking about and that he had often lost consciousness. They were astonished when they heard of our misfortune and kept shaking their heads in disbelief and repeating, "Tsk, tsk." However, they seemed much more preoccupied with their own troubles. During the night in the mountains, they had been caught in a storm and were drenched through and through. They had spread their coats, blankets and packs out to dry and sat jealously guarding their possessions. Later, however, they helped us gather boughs, branches, and rushes in order to weave them together into a sort of litter similar to those used by well-born women or for transporting valuable female slaves. We shall transport Hazaz in this. His condition is becoming more and more serious. He has not regained consciousness since our return.

Extracts from the Journal of Master Jack

May 6th, 2036

Yesterday, I wrote of our good fortune. Today, it has left us. Two camel thieves surprised us before dawn. However, they acted so stupidly that it didn't take us long to regain possession of our animals. Unfortunately, our caravan guide was so badly wounded in this attack that I fear for his life. My antibiotics were lost in the Congo River along with my pistols and ammunition. All of which I could have used today.

Merchants who have just arrived from El Fasher said they left there three days ago. It would be wonderful if we could reach El Fasher in three days. Perhaps poor Hazaz would have a chance of getting medical help in time—if any is to be had there.

We shall remain here one more night. The spring just doesn't have enough water for the number of people and animals now camping here, but thanks to the rain in the mountains, the water level is rising rapidly. However, the water is too muddy. I hope the sediment will have settled by morning.

The two scoundrels have not shown their faces all day, although they were not at all intimidated by my threat. It's a good thing that there are now eleven more men here.

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* * *

I was proud of Beschir today. After the first shock, he proved alert and prudent, with great character. It would have been easy for him to let his revenge gain the upper hand. He's a good boy and I shall try to spend more time with him in future. Hazaz will no longer be in a position to look after him. But I shall take on this extra responsibility gladly.

I am not looking forward to meeting the notorious sovereign of El Fasher, the ruler of the Sudan. He is supposed to be partly of European descent. Those are often the worst despots in the countries which were once called the third world and which are the only countries in which human beings still live today.

Hazaz has been lying in fever for the past two days and he keeps asking, "Did you hear the fat one laughing? He laughed the whole night. The whole night." I wipe the sweat from his forehead. His wound stinks. It has begun to fester.

"What does he mean by the fat one?" asked Master Jack.

"Oh, that is the hyena. Most of our fairy tales are about the stupid fat one who is taken in by everything, even squirrels and lizards, and always falls flat on his face."

"Then he has every right to laugh! For we are the stupid ones this time," Master Jack said. He was right.

He is very worried about Hazaz's condition but tries not to let it show. I pray to Allah and implore him to let his cape of kindness be large enough to cover Hazaz with just one tiny corner.

We climbed for three days through ravines and rugged canyons and rocks as large as palaces. The road was difficult and the animals tired quickly.

Master Jack had built a frame on which we could set down the litter with Hazaz it in to load it on to another camel. We had to lean it against the rocks so that it wouldn't collapse as the animals were so tired and impatient to be rid of their loads that they fell to their knees before I could even loosen the straps and give the command to kneel. They are taking advantage of me and I have to use the whip to curb their growing stubbornness.

They notice the absence of Hazaz's strong hand.

Late in the afternoon of the third day of our journey, we reached the summit of the pass. Bare mountains as far as the eye could see, a labyrinth of stone. No plants, no animals, no sign of man's work. We rode on into a land that was not made for humans, a land that had frozen in the middle of creation as if Allah had lost interest in his work before separating the mountains and valleys. In spite of the merciless sun, this

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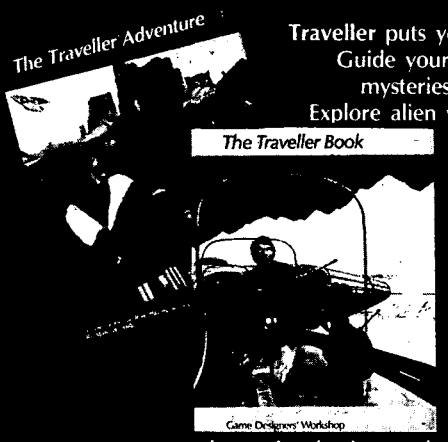

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land is strangely dark and gloomy as if it were the bottom of an ocean. Sometimes the vultures sail over this land in elegant flight, creatures of a higher world descending to investigate the ocean floor, their sharp eyes looking for prey.

I have never been so far east. The loneliness of this expanse of land is so overwhelming. There is hardly a trace of the caravan route. The rocks are hard. The signs indicating the way to A'alam are often only two or three stones one on top of the other and one needs good eyes to make them out. Master Jack always stops and stares through his glass. In this desolate land there are no people. El Fasher cannot be far now.

The next morning we are surrounded by a patrol. Threatening figures on longlegged Mahari, racing camels of the famous Tuareg breed, with saddles and bridles of silver, covers and turbans with white and green tassels, the colors of the king. The cavalrymen are armed with lances and crossbows, some of them even with rifles. An officer with a laced jacket, with green and white epaulettes, orders his steed to kneel. After cross-examining us quickly, he lets his men dismount, shares salt and tea with us. He inspects the litter with a critical eye. Yes, there are doctors, Egyptians, Arabs and even light-skinned doctors. They will be able to give Hazaz the medical attention he needs. Under cover of the cavalrymen, we ride into El Fasher only four hours away. We are not given quarters in one of the caravansaries, but are taken directly to the palace of the king, which he had had built on a plateau in the north of the city. There are many soldiers and many light-skinned people. The market place is full of activity. Affluence is apparent, flourishing under power and common sense. Laughing faces—an oasis of color in this dark wasteland—El Fasher.

The palace of the king: the sumptuous nest of a bird of prey, grandiose, a fortress against attack: beautiful, built of stone and clay, ornamented with colored tiles. The sun has reached its highest point and casts straight, sharp-angled shadows, created by the many ledges, eaves and balconies over the facade of the building. Two burnt out tanks flank the entrance of the palace like frozen mastodons, their guns raised like threatening trunks.

In the courtyard before the palace we are told to unsaddle the camels. A doctor is called. He is a young Egyptian. Hazaz is then carried away. What will it cost? He has a wide nose and the corners of his mouth drop under his black moustache, an honest, trustworthy face. He lifts his hand as if testing the weight of the air while his eyes take note of our belongings—two camels, three, we'll see. We are given a room near the stables. Our animals will be looked after. Master Jack opens his packs, looks for fresh clothes and a present for the host.

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Extracts from the Journal of Master Jack

May 10th, 2036

El Fasher at last! It has not lost any of its significance as the former capital of Darfur. Even the size of the population has remained the same as before the war, unlike most of the cities of the Sahel Zone. However, it is no longer the hub of trade that it once was. Once, in former times, the caravans went through Bahr El Ghazal to the Upper Nile and through Equatoria to Ethiopia, to Uganda into Northern Kenya and then on to Somalia and came back with salt for the herds. Today, it is one of the most important stops between east and west, part of the old pilgrim route from Chad to Darfur and Kordofan to Nubia.

Achmed Ueled ben Muchtar, King of Sudan and as he calls himself, Emperor of the edge of the still inhabitable world and A'alam of Allah to the holy places, is apparently not the despot he is made out to be. He can thank his diplomatic skill and the tactical ability of his officers for his reputation as a cruel and severe despot. His reputation increases with distance. In the city itself, there is no trace of tyranny. The city is crowded with Europeans and refugees from Libya, Egypt and Arabia and many have the privileges of well-respected citizens. However, there are many light-skinned slaves, but they are well fed and certainly do not live in want. The troops as well seem to be predominantly Europeans.

The royal residence was designed by a French architect who had been received at court. It is an object of interest far and wide, sumptuously combining elements of European architecture with those of the orient. It is said that more than 3000 people live in this palace in which we also were received with such hospitality. Hazaz is being treated by a doctor. I hope that it is not too late and that the necessary antibiotics are available.

I am racking my brains thinking of a present for my host. I have a dozen magnifying glasses, two watches, a few yards of the finest asbestos cloth, four or five compasses and my telescope. I would, not like to part with the latter. All this seems very meager for a sovereign of whom it is said that he led plundering expeditions as far as the African Mediterranean Coast and is reputed to have returned home with fabulous treasures. Apparently, he even has an electric car and a helicopter. However, there is no gasoline for the helicopter. But he is sure to send an expedition soon to the abandoned oil lines of Libya in order to get his toy moving.

I have just visited Hazaz. He is lying in a white bed in a room with white

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walls. He is being looked after by a male nurse who was trying to put a glass tube into his mouth. His arm has been freshly bandaged and no longer stinks. But Hazaz, himself, looks as if he is going to die. His appearance frightens me. He didn't recognize me. The nurse pushed me out and as I tried to crouch just outside the door ordered me to go.

Yesterday, Master Jack was invited to the king's palace. Today, we have moved into the part of the palace reserved for guests. The rooms are high and spacious and the floors are laid out with the finest carpets. Many light-skinned men live in the palace, especially artists and technicians to the king. By no means all of them have been castrated as many have their wives and children with them.

In the evening supper was served in the inner courtyard of the palace. Afterwards a light-skinned musician played a stringed instrument called a "mandolino." It is played by plucking at the strings and sounds very strange, sometimes like the cooing of turtle doves, at times sad and then again, merry. He sang this song to the music.

"If rain hovers over the land
like a black muleta
then, my friends, death is near . . ."

But the king called down to him, "Not such songs! The rainy season is far off and death doesn't interest us at all."

Everyone laughed and the musician sang some other songs. He has that red skin with white spots deepened by the light just like those who come out of the countries of the dead. On his bald head behind his left ear there is a wet wound which looks as though it will never heal and the whites of his eyes are a sickly yellow. But his voice is all the more beautiful filling the courtyard and making me forget the miserable appearance of the man.

He sang six or seven old songs from the past—I can almost remember the exact words of one of them. It was an amusing song about a little monkey who tried to reach the stars and in doing so set fire to the tree where he was sleeping and scorched his fur in the process. This was the refrain:

"The play is over,
the monkey dead,
the stars remain on high.
The monkey's tree,
and man's own dream
as dust now scattered fly.
Thus perishes mankind too
by his own hand,
himself Eternity to deny."

A frail light-skinned deaf and dumb youth stood beside the singer. He

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had the shy fright-filled eyes of those who cannot hear. He watched the lively faces of those listening and turned again to stare at the lips of the singer. Each time the musician put his instrument down, he picked up his Jew's harp and put it to his mouth to accompany the song. This sounded very strange as he was always just one note behind because he followed the lip movement. It was this imperfection that made their playing together so charming.

A pilgrim, who had been to the holy places and was on his way home to the west, told Master Jack that between Omdurman and Port Said flying ships have often been seen travelling through the air and hovering noiselessly over the desert. They have crews of giant beetles and are navigated by creatures with birds' heads. Such Egyptian beasts as one finds carved in stone in certain places arose from the mud of Lake Nasser when it dried up. Another reported that he had seen such a bird-headed creature with his own eyes. It had been killed near Atbara. A carnival showman had had this thing that was neither man nor bird stuffed and exhibited at fairs up and down the countryside between Omdurman and El Obeid until the remains had stunk so fearfully that somebody burned them and chased the showman to the devil.

Although Master Jack is otherwise very smart, in such things he is terribly credulous. He listened patiently and asked what the flying ships looked like, asked about the colors of the plumage of the bird-headed creatures, asked about the beetles and the scarabs which according to the stories must have looked more like cockroaches. And he asked many other questions. The boastings of the pilgrims impressed me just as little as the other pack of liars—I didn't believe one word.

When I went to our guest chambers on the second floor, I met a man on the stairs who, judging from his clothes, had a high position at court. He refused to let me pass.

"Come here," he ordered.

I obeyed, stepped nearer and bowed. He slung his arm intimately around me and pressed me into a corner. His well-kept white beard smelled of sweet perfume, but his breath was pregnant with Laqbi.

"Listen, young man," he said in a drunken voice and grasped me tightly between the legs. I cursed in pain.

"Have you already got a teacher?" he tittered happily.

"I belong to Master Jack," I said in a tortured voice.

He let me go. I was horrified at the shamelessness of it all and ran away from him as fast as I could. As I ran up the steps I could hear him calling after me laughing, "Who the hell is Master Jack?"

I awoke in the middle of the night. Someone was standing in the door. I recognized the weak profile, the bald head and the delicate figure. It

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was the youth who had played the Jew's harp. He looked cautiously to the right and left and then he stared at me.

"What do you want?" I asked in a low voice so as not to wake Master Jack asleep in the next room. It then occurred to me that the youth couldn't hear me at all. His presence made me ill at ease. He raised both arms and made a few dancing steps setting his bare feet on the complex mosaic moonlight-flooded tiles, so that he seemed to be floating. I followed the movements of his feet with my eyes as though intoxicated. I felt reality slowly slipping away. Through the movement of the dance and the magic of the moonlight I was slipping into the realm of unreality. I pulled myself together and tried to shake off the growing numbness. At that same moment, the youth disappeared. I ran out into the corridor, but I couldn't find him anywhere. Where could he have disappeared to so quickly? Under a lantern at the end of the corridor, I saw a guard asleep at a table. His head rested on his crossed arms. I padded through the moonlight to the window and looked down on the courtyard in which the concert had taken place. It lay deserted, covered in a melancholy silver light. In the dark shadows pincered scarabs under the command of bird-headed pirate captains lurked to storm the sleeping palace.

"Beschir?" Master Jack called. I ran to the threshold of his room, but he didn't say any more. Had he called my name in his sleep?

Late that afternoon when Master Jack had been summoned to the king, I roamed through the upper floors of the palace. No one stopped me. I found a garden, a small paradise about a hundred feet long and forty wide surrounded by a building several floors high. Gravel paths led through the flower beds and hedges, the graceful pomegranate and peach trees, to a fountain in the center. Its water sparkled in the midday sun falling wastefully on the large meat-like leaves of the water-lilies that had almost overgrown the little pond. The falling water gave the air a pleasant freshness. Several peacocks paraded with ornamental step over the grass and spread out their shimmering green and dark blue feathers into fans, stiff trains and rustling aureoles. I was fascinated. How could there be so much color in this land of melancholy light and dark stone?

At the other end of the park, there was a draw-well; its cisterns were just being filled to feed the fountain. A great wooden treadwheel the height of at least three men turned creakingly while three slaves clad in loin cloths climbed up over the smooth worn treads to keep it moving. Their white bodies were wet with sweat and their heavy breathing was drowned by the splashing water. Then one of the black leather pails fastened one behind the other on an iron chain reached the top, tipped over and emptied its contents into a channel which led to the cisterns, then collapsed and dived below again.

I stopped and watched. In the narrow shade of the clay wall an overseer

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stood with a braided leather whip in his hand. Three other slaves crouched on the floor near him and were allowed to rest until it was their turn on the wheel. They looked me over with dull glances, but no one spoke. Only the creaking of the wooden wheel, the gasping of the climbing men and the splashing and falling of the water were to be heard. Suddenly the silence of the courtyard was interrupted by the brief cry of a woman which came from one of the upper windows of the palace. A second louder cry was followed by a third and a fourth, becoming a swelling rhythmic series of cries. Breathless cries and at the same time deep throaty groans. Then something strange occurred which was incomprehensible to me. One of the slaves who was brooding dully in the shadows had stood up, a muscular stooped man with dark hair and an unshaved face, had clenched both his hands into fists and held up his arms as though he were carrying a burden and jerked his hips back and forth in rhythm with the cries. With his eyes closed and biting his lower lip, he emitted a deep short grunt with each jerk while his loin cloth bulged. The whip came down with a slap on his naked shoulders, but it was a negligent, almost good-natured, blow and the man didn't seem to feel it at all. At that moment the cries broke off with a sharp high note and the slave stopped his movements as though he had been paralyzed. His face had an expression I could not interpret, pained and yet happy.

The overseer bared gap teeth under his moustache and laughed and the two slaves crouching in the shadows joined unwillingly in his laughter. However, the others on the wheel kept climbing in dull preoccupied haste like a pack of confused apes in flight.

I smiled uncomfortably at the overseer for I could not guess the reason for his amusement. I quickly turned away and went further into the palace garden, past the pond and the splashing fountains emerging from the nostrils of the mighty stone hippopotamus which, half concealed by water lilies, raised its head above the water and stared at me with its blind little stone eyes.

I saw the deaf and dumb youth sitting on a stone bench under a pomegranate tree. For a moment I didn't know what to do. Was it a dream I had had in the night? Had the moonlight played a trick on me? Or did he really walk like a ghost through the corridors of the palace at night in order to give his mute inner world expression by dancing?

I sat down on the bench and laid the palm of my hand on the cool stone. The youth moved his mouth as if he wanted to say something to me, but he was only able to grunt. He raised his hands and grasped at his mouth as if to pluck the words he couldn't express forcibly from his lips. In his agony of wanting to say something, he rolled his eyes back so that only the whites could be seen. I was still sure he was trying to say something to me. However, it became clear that he was having a fit.

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He bent backwards and thrust his bald head backwards and forwards as if he wanted to break through some barrier. Then he lay thrashing about inclined over the bench, while in the corner of his crying wordless mouth foam gathered. I held him tight in fear of his falling off the bench. I fought with him finally covering his delicate body with mine. It had suddenly developed unbelievable power. I looked around desperately for help as I could no longer control him. I wanted to call the men at the well to get their help in my desperate struggle with the dark power that had taken over his body in broad daylight and was throwing it back and forth like a rag doll until I was completely out of breath.

Suddenly, I heard footsteps on the gravel path. I saw two small white hands cradling the head of the youth, stroking his temples and ears. It was as if they had worked a magic spell. The dark power left his body immediately, wiping away the stiffness of his limbs. Then to my complete bewilderment I realized that the body I was holding was that of a young girl. Directly before me, I saw the spotty bald head of the singer, the dreadful watery wound. I had to grit my teeth to keep from groaning but as I turned my head to release myself from the horror, I was looking into the still more fearful eye of a peacock—a great ringlike grey-rayed pool of protein behind which there was nothing. An attentive, absolutely expressionless peephole into a small stupid world governed by reflexes. Then, with a jerk of its head, the bird moved away and let me see the senseless magnificence of its plumage.

Slowly, ashamed, I removed my hands from the body of the girl and sat up. The singer—he seemed surprisingly tall as he stood before me—smiled at me apologetically.

"I thank you. She could have hurt herself," he said while helping her up. "It overcomes her sometimes. I have told her time and again that she must not go into the sun."

"But she was sitting in the shade!"

He shrugged his shoulders. "That is our heritage," he said. "The heritage of the great civilization. Thus perishes mankind too by his own hand, himself Eternity to deny." He smiled.

The girl looked at me enigmatically with her bright eyes. I would have given anything to be able to make myself understood. If only I could have asked her something and if only she could have answered. But it was like talking to a star. It gives no answer but light.

"What is her name?"

"Simone."

"A strange name."

"So?" He took her in his arms. "She cannot betray me. She can't even hear the cock crow."

I didn't understand what he meant. When we left the palace garden,

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the overseer and his slaves had disappeared. The worn treads of the wooden wheel glittered in the sun. Water ran from the overflow of the filled cisterns and dripped onto the stone pavement. The black leather pails hung on the chain, full-bellied on the one side, loose and collapsed on the other.

A woman stood at one of the upper windows and looked down. I saw her mouth for a moment before she closed her veil. She smiled.

Extracts from the Journal of Master Jack

May 25th, 2036

We have been living in the palace of the king for two weeks now. He has asked to see me many times and I have had the opportunity of talking in detail with him. I would say he's in his mid-fifties with a rare mixture of charisma, intelligence and foolhardiness. The condottieri are said to have been that way. He says he is descended from the caliphs and as far back as the prophets. However, it would not surprise me if the caliphs were called Stravros, Kostas, Spiros or something similar and if the prophet was called Pythagoras and owned bars in Beirut and Alexandria. He is the born adventurer and knows how to get along with the right people.

He also owns the most important scrap metal collection in the world. Both tanks before the gate of the palace are supposed to have been driven by Qadhafi himself when he took over Chad. He organized expeditions into the bombed and radioactively contaminated former oil wells in Libya. He says he brought back rich plunder from the dead cities of the Mediterranean, but they are mostly useless technical things that can never ever be put to use again: such as telephone installations and a complete air traffic control tower. However, he has the most important timepiece collection in the world. He is absolutely mad about time-measuring devices. He has all conceivable shapes and constructions—a collection spanning five centuries.

I told him about my expedition and our belief that somewhere in the Near East space activities were taking place which we could not identify. He thinks it is possible that creatures from outer space have landed on earth. "It would be a wonder if we hadn't aroused any interest after the fireworks we set off here on earth!" he said. He insists on giving us a troop of soldiers to accompany us on our journey to the "edge of the world" as he also calls it. In return for this favor, we should bring him one of the "flying ships" home if we can find one.

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He gave me the journal of his architect to read as a present. The one who built the palace. His name was Henri Fleurel. He died two years ago. It is written in French. I shall read it on our way through Kordofan.

3
THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

In the morning, we visited Hazaz. His arm has been cut off. The emptiness under the sheet was horrible. I had so often admired that strong arm when he used the awl, saddled the camels, or, with the same strong hand, forced them to kneel—simply gone. I couldn't look and yet, as if paralyzed, I stared at the empty space where his arm ought to have been. The doctor said that gangrene had set in too deep. The bone had been damaged and had splintered. There was a funny sound in my ears and I felt as if I were going to lose consciousness. I ran out of the door and stood at a window on the other side of the corridor breathing heavily. Hazaz is sleeping, he knows nothing of his misfortune. Why was I not able to slay those jackasses that morning?

I pray that Hazaz shall live. It is said that Allah's grace is boundless. All I ask of him is just a small corner, just enough to cover what is left of Hazaz.

Master Jack took me aside today and said that in a short time he must leave in order to reach the Nile at high water. It is for me to decide whether I shall continue with him. The journey will now be dangerous as we will be entering the last regions of the inhabitable world and now, more than ever, we shall meet up with contaminated animals and beasts with bodies of men.

"All pilgrims take on this danger," I replied. "They do it for God!"

"But that is the difference." he said. "They are religious fanatics. They are looking for danger in order to prove that God is with them. They are possessed."

"And what do you want to prove, Master Jack?" I asked him.

He hesitated. Then he laughed and said, "You're a smart boy, Beschir. Yes, I am also possessed. I want to find out what is stationed in the northeast, who has set up a space center there and why they are stubbornly ignoring the signals of our orbital tracking system, two stations of which are still working."

"What is an orbal tracking system?"

"Orbital. The paths of the stars around the world can be controlled by it. We are a sort of caravan guide of the heavens."

"All the stars?"

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"What . . . ? No, naturally only the artificial ones. The satellites of the earth. There are a lot of them up there and many are going to be giving out data for centuries, data that no one is capable of evaluating anymore."

"And what about Hazaz?" I asked after a while.

"I would have liked you to have stayed here with him to be at his side when he gets better. You could have joined a caravan on its way west and returned home. But Hazaz's condition is still very critical." He stroked his hand over his sunburnt face and through his long dark hair. He didn't like the thought of leaving Hazaz behind. "On the other hand . . ." he looked at me pleadingly with his bright-colored eyes as if asking me to forgive him. My shyness made me avoid his glance. "Should the worst happen, you would then be alone here. The loose morals being what they are in this palace, I would fear for your life. Lecherous bastards are always on the lookout for stray young boys to train as male concubines for themselves or to sell as eunuchs into slavery."

I remembered with horror my encounter on the staircase, that encounter about which I had never uttered a word. "I've decided. I'm riding with you, Master Jack!" I replied with resolution.

Everything has been packed. The Ghararas, light bags made of strong camel-hair yarn that the king had given us as a present, were ready to be loaded. Just before leaving, we visited Hazaz. He was in good health and waved to us with the stump of his arm.

"Wait two or three days," he pleaded. "And then I'll be able to ride with you." But the doctor made it clear that Hazaz had a good chance of surviving only if his wound did not become gangrenous. There were hardly any medical supplies left and, if any were found, they had usually been spoiled by the heat.

We wished Hazaz luck and Allah's protection.

"I shall look for work and wait for you," he said. "Until next spring if necessary!"

The doctor charged us three camels. I went to get them and brought them to him. I have not seen Simone, the young girl of the singer, again, although I have looked for her everywhere.

Extracts from the Journal of Master Jack

June 5th, 2036

It was with great regret that we left Hazaz behind at the palace. We are now on our way east at last. We could have joined a caravan, also on its way to El Obeid, with more than 200 camels, but it's moving too slowly for my liking. Even if we cut down our rests to a bare minimum, we have a stretch of 40 to 45 days journey before us. It's almost 1000 miles to

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Omdurman. Should it be necessary to penetrate even further north and make our way down the Nile, it will only be possible to get over the rapids during high water, especially over the first and second rapids near Wadi Halfa and Aswan as nothing is known about the state of things there since the dam disappeared.

We are making good progress on our way to the east. Our four escorts are adept hunters. We eat meat almost every day. They are unruly but apparently reliable boys. It would be nice if I could convince them to escort us further than Omdurman, but they have their orders.

The king's four escorts have set a pace that puts a great strain on our animals, but Master Jack seems to be pleased. He is so restless.

Yesterday, Alkuttabu, the best hunter of our escorts, shot a gazelle at a distance of 250 feet with his rifle. Today, we found a dead desert fox. Its hide was rotten.

"Don't touch it!" Alkuttabu warned me. He heaped dry wood over the body of the dead fox and lit it. The smell was horrible. We rode on. "Half a century ago," Alkuttabu said, "there were more than a thousand lions here in Kordofan. I know, as this was my homeland." He has the jet black skin of the Nuba and he is even taller than Hazaz. "You'll hardly find one today. They prey on the weaklings of the herd and they are usually ill. That kills them, you know?" He likes to repeat, "You know." Each time he juts his massive black chin in my direction.

"Are you afraid of lions?" I want to know. He smiles. He has large white buck teeth with gaps between them.

"Yes, but only dead ones," he says laughing a high giggling laugh that one wouldn't expect from a man of his size and clicks his tongue delightedly.

He often looks to the southeast in the direction of the Nuba mountains, his homeland. If the wind comes from the south, the Samun as they call it, the one with the touch of poison, then he and his companions tighten their mouth scarves and a look of great discomfort comes over them.

To the south we occasionally saw the white haze of the swamp area of Bahr El Arab on the horizon. Now, a fire has been raging there for the past few days and the air is thick with flying ashes and the smell of burning wood.

"The shepherds have set fire to the bulrushes in order to smoke out the breeding places of the birds," Alkuttabu explains. "But every winter migratory birds bring the plague into the country and thousands of cattle die."

The farther we get to the east, the more particular our hunters become with their quarry. First the animal is checked for any outer deformations,

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then it is torn apart and the inner organs are carefully examined for any inflammation or tumors. Sometimes a look at the mouth and eyes is enough and the slain animal is then covered with stones or burned. The hunters won't let any vultures nearer than 50 feet, for now we meet with dying and bedraggled birds at every step. At the moment, there is enough healthy quarry, but the area is becoming more and more unreal and hotter than ever before. The haze over Sudd, the giant swamp area, the Bahr El Jebel, the white Nile and its numerous tributaries that flow into the plains of Bahr El Ghazal—all this blurs the horizon. The rainy season is drawing near.

En Nahud lies behind us, a desolate place with an abandoned garrison. We bought dates for the camels and sugar and salt. Master Jack measured the salt with his ticker, which he calls a geiger counter, and said that it was radioactively contaminated and that we would have to throw it away. Our escorts would have loved to beat the merchant who sold us the contaminated salt. However, Master Jack made sure they understood that the man could not have known himself and that he had probably been sold salt from Ethiopia or Somalia.

Master Jack reads a lot in a little book that the king gave him as a present. Yesterday evening, I know he was crying, I saw him. It really touched me.

"Why are you crying?" I asked him.

He closed the book and said, "I am not crying. The light is already too weak to read by and I have been reading too long. My eyes are watering. There's a good boy, bring me another cup of tea, Beschir."

I brought him a cup of tea. There was enough light to thread a needle by.

Extracts from the Journal of Master Jack

June 24th, 2036

We are progressing faster than ever expected. If we are lucky, the rainy season will only catch up with us in Omdurman. It ought to take us 20 days to get there if everything continues as well as it has so far.

The journal of Henri Fleurel, the architect of the king, is a shocking document which moved me to tears. Naturally, we know what happened, but the extent of the horror can only be really understood if all the ghastly details of the desperate exodus that the survivors from Europe went through are known.

Henri Fleurel was an architect in Perpignan, France. His wife and three

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of his children were lost in the war. Those who survived, his eldest daughter and her husband and a few neighbors, convinced that they were not radioactively contaminated or infected by the biological warfare, risked the crossing to Africa in a boat. They were not only shot at from land, but Algerian torpedo boats were constantly on guard to drive the numerous refugee boats away from the coast. It was only in Tunisia, where the authorities were more tolerant, that they were allowed to land. When they realized the extent of the danger in Tunisia too, the massacre began. Europeans, who wanted to exchange the valuables that they had salvaged for food, were brutally murdered. Or they isolated refugees into camps, but by then it was too late. They had brought the biological plague to Oran. That devilish plague developed in the war research laboratories, seeped in from the battlefields of Europe, depopulated the whole of North Africa within four months and spread like a bushfire through countries not even directly concerned with the war.

Countries like Sudan, Chad, Niger and Mali imagined themselves to be relatively protected by the desert belt in the north, but it soon became clear that the Sahara was the lesser of two evils for those who had fled the hell of nuclear war. Enterprising caravan guides, promising themselves rich plunder, told stories of missionary settlements in Uganda, in the Upper Congo, and in Rhodesia, supposedly organizing migrations to a safer place. The old tale of Prester John's Kingdom in the heart of Africa had survived for centuries and it was to this tale that the pilgrims turned, willing to believe anything, putting all their hopes into this paradise—a paradise that was as unreal as a paradise on the moon. Even if the pilgrims survived thousands of miles of desert after untold hazards, they then faced firing squads in Niger, Chad, or Sudan. The troops massacred them in the desert, after having been informed in time by the caravan guides who naturally kept a quarter of the loot collected for this service—in order—so the official story went—to protect their own people from sickness and death. The refugees were given an ultimatum to pull back to the north at once—an absolutely deadly venture. Then the guns did the talking. If there was not enough ammunition, the Kabartu, honorary executioners, were put to work to smash the heads of those due to die with one full swing of their iron-clad clubs. They often worked for hours until exhaustion set in. Untold horrors must have taken place in such "mantraps." Most horrible of all, according to Henri Fleurel, was the screaming of the young boys who were rounded up and castrated to be sold as eunuchs.

"I know," he writes, "that in these countries it has been a custom for centuries, especially at the large slave markets, to order barbers to carry out a total amputation with their razor and pour hot butter in the horrible

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wound in order to stop the bleeding. I shall never forget the smell of hot butter and burning flesh. I shall never forget the screams of the castrated boys. If they lived through the ordeal they were then sold for a good price to the palaces of those in power as male concubines or eunuchs. Naturally, they had an explanation for this horror too. The genes of the young boys were radioactively contaminated—one couldn't take the risk. I understood —genocide is the worst kind of murder."

Henri Fleurel and half a dozen scholars, "selected" with the aid of a questionnaire before the journey to the supposed missionary settlements, survived the massacre and were sold to the court of El Fasher.

The mummies of Bir Meschru keep haunting me, robbing me of my sleep. The gold fillings in their teeth had been stolen.

Master Jack has hardly spoken at all the past few days. He seems very depressed. Even Alkuttabu's jokes don't have any effect on him at all. The Samun, the breath of poison, blows hot and stifling. Instinctively, we try not to breathe more than is necessary. How lovely a cleansing storm would be, bringing the Charief, the rainy season.

We ride into El Obeid. There are even more soldiers here. Many of the old caravansaries and the pilgrims' quarters are empty. The town lies in ruins, but the garrison is new and being enlarged. The flags of the king fly over it: green and white. We are given quarters in the barracks.

The stern reputation of the king can be felt here, though nothing of the freedom that rules in his palace. The laws in El Obeid are merciless. If anyone with any signs of the plague arrives, his left ear is cut off as a warning to others and he is run out of the town. Should he dare show himself a second time, he is caught, clubbed to death and his body burned before the city.

The mutants are luckier. They are led before a Tabib, an official doctor chosen and paid by the town, who examines them carefully and then makes his decision. Should a man turn out to be a mutant, he is not allowed to spread his contaminated sperm, which means—off to the barber and castration.

Our escorts spent the day in a public bath. Master Jack went with them. They came back to the barracks very late in the night and were all very drunk.

Master Jack wasn't able to stand up alone. Alkuttabu helped me carry him to bed. The others started a fight with some soldiers who had complained about the noise. Since then, Keiki, our officer, has been going around with a bandage over his nose and a swollen eye.

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June 30th, 2036

Today, just this quick note:

1) *I believe that civilization will continue to exist. There are still public baths with hot water and other comforts.*
2) *I got myself stoned last night. I really needed it to wash down Fleurel's taste of hot butter.*
3) *The prostitutes of El Obeid are so unbelievably ugly that it takes several cups of Laqbi to overcome my disgust, which however (see 2) I finally succeeded in doing. I made them show me their left ears first.*

We only stayed in El Obeid for four days. Now we are on our way to Omdurman. The paths have been softened by two intense downpours. Red spiders with velvet-like bodies, Kul Ningilibe, which are called Fanna Kimme in this region, swarm by the hundreds of thousands over the ground all along the way as they usually do at the beginning of the rainy season.

But the mosquitoes bother us more than the spiders. We bought fantastic white fly swatters made of long baboon neck hairs from a merchant and we seem to do nothing else the whole day but swat around us to get rid of the pests. Their stings can be very dangerous. Who knows whose blood they sucked before?

The river is near. We can tell by the smell in the air.

4
THE RIVER

Two days before we reached Omdurman, we overtook a caravan which had left El Fasher at the beginning of April. Two or three dozen pilgrims made up the caravan and they received Master Jack with hate-filled remarks and a display of anger. There was even one of those young Muhadshirin, who believe they hold the wisdom of the world in those small dried out gourds in which they keep their thin ink. I didn't like the travelling schoolboy the moment I saw him. He didn't have anything better to do than seek out Master Jack's company and fawn upon him, full of his own importance. Master Jack, in his guilelessness—Allah hold his hand wide over him—answered each question frankly and openly. The know-it-all scratched everything down on his Loah, his wooden writing block, and assiduously covered it with writing that looked like fly

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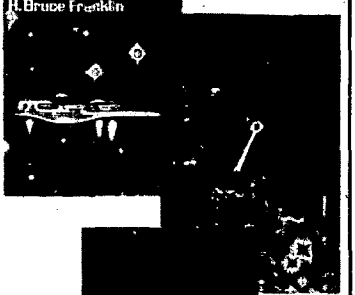

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specks. The traditional goat skin that he wore stank and he himself even more, as if he had not washed since El Fasher.

Master Jack seemed not to notice the smell of this sanctimonious billygoat. The supposed learning and thirst for knowledge of the stupid babbler seemed to please him. He told him all about his orbital star trekking, about the heavenly caravansaries and the earthly satellites and other flying ships to be found under the stars at night.

Inevitably, as soon as we arrived in Omdurman and had unsaddled our camels in a Messhid, the stinking billygoat rushed to the administrator of the mosque, who was at the same time justice of the town, and denounced Master Jack for blasphemy. Two guardsmen of the town arrived, put him in shackles and led him off. Keiki, Alkuttabu, Schuschan and Alifa were nowhere to be found. They had gone to the town and nearby garrison to look for better accommodation for us rather than the stinking pilgrim quarters. But it is not easy. The city is overrun with pilgrims waiting to join a caravan to the east.

I was powerless. I bellowed as loud as I could and kicked one of the guards in his fat ass. This only brought me a painful blow in my ribs with his spear and a reprimand from Master Jack who put up no resistance at all and let himself be led off.

Half the afternoon went by before our four escorts arrived. I was furious and told them what had happened. At first they were stunned by the news, then they set off in anticipation of adventure. I remained with our packs because everywhere I looked there were vultures.

Extract from the Journal of Master Jack

July 16th, 2036

Today, something very unpleasant happened. A young man, who accompanied us on the last two days of our journey, whose apparent thirst for knowledge and interest in scientific and technical things flattered me, whose questions about our work on Mount Darwin I gladly answered, reported me to the local authorities for heresy. I was shackled and brought before a sort of religious court that had been set up on the spur of the moment. I was accused of having maintained that Allah does not guide the stars through the heavens at night. I had maintained that a group of white unbelievers were guiding them from some station that they had set up somewhere in the south on a mountain. The justice asked me whether I really believed all this and whether I knew that such blasphemous talk was punished with instant death. I must admit that I have met up with many dangers, but this time I really feared for my life.

* * *

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Luckily, at that moment, our four escorts appeared in court, boxed the guards' ears for them and freed me from my shackles. I begged them to restrain themselves knowing their temperament and fearing trouble with the local authorities.

"In whose name are you forcing entry to this court?" the justice demanded.

I caught my breath as Alkuttabu aimed his rifle at the justice and pulled the trigger. The bullet hit the wall, barely two inches above the distinguished turban, and plaster rained down on his desk. Crying for help the justice took shelter under the desk.

"Next time I'll aim lower!" Alkuttabu bellowed in a thundering voice. Then he continued in his curious tongue clicking dialect, "I am here by order of the king. This white scholar is travelling under the mandate of the king as the scholars of the king guide the stars around the earth at night." And as if this weren't enough, he added, "All the stars!"

The justice crawled out from under his desk and thundered back in a voice just as loud, "Then it should have been your duty and obligation to take better care of this man. You should have made your presence legally known to me before rushing off to the brothels!"

Alkuttabu stared at him speechlessly and nodded his head in acknowledgement. In the meantime, Keiki and Alifa had already caught the young scoundrel, who had tried to disappear unobtrusively. They fastened him to a rack outside, cleverly designed to force the victim into a humiliating posture, and, with remarkable mathematical precision for desert boys, gave him one hundred strokes of the whip on each of his unwashed feet.

I fear that I put an end to his thirst for learning for awhile. It will certainly be two weeks before he can continue his educational journey—unless Allah provides him with a sedan carrier.

We were given quarters in the garrison, ugly flat buildings around a dusty inner courtyard. The courtyard becomes a filthy mire with every downpour. At night black worms crawl up along the raw whitewashed walls fleeing the damp. They wither up in the sun during the day and fall down, becoming plunder for the chickens, who take this gift from the heavens for granted.

It is not at all easy to leave Omdurman. The power of the authorities and the power of the king represented by our escort Keiki apparently ends on the banks of the river. The muddy river is rising.

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This is the domain of Ngar Ba, the overseer of the river, as he is called by the captain of the harbor and the domain of the Tuweirat, the cavalry of the king which escorts the pilgrims' caravans to Port Sudan and back. The cavalrymen of the king are all, without exception, rascals and cutthroats who shamelessly enrich themselves on the pilgrims. Perhaps there is something in the name after all. Master Jack said it wouldn't surprise him if Kostas Ben Muchtar of El Fasher didn't have a hand in this lucrative business as it would be no problem for his garrison to do away with the riff-raff.

These so-called cavalrymen are thus allowed to ask a fortune for their service of "Protection from highwaymen, monsters and mutants"; and to top it all off are not above demanding a present if they see something that takes their fancy. However, it is true that they are riding to the coast through a country in which all living things are contaminated, even the grasshoppers, and where all water is polluted and undrinkable. Whoever takes it upon himself to go beyond the edge of the inhabitable world, must take everything he needs until his return . . . food, salt, sugar, water and more water.

We have to do the same.

We will make the journey to Atbara in a sailing vessel that will not be let down into the contaminated water until necessary. This time is to be decided by the overseer of the harbor, Ngar Ba, together with the Tuweirat, the cavalrymen of the king, who observe the river incessantly and estimate its danger. Funnily enough, the favorable time of minimum contamination always corresponds with the time when the maximum number of pilgrims have gathered, so that the vessel built for at the most one hundred people and two hundred animals, can then be loaded with two hundred pilgrims and three hundred and fifty animals.

Our request to make use of the services of the cavalrymen of the king only as far as Atbara was received with a benevolent shrug of the shoulders. This would be condescendingly permitted if the entire amount for the "protection from highwaymen, monsters and mutants" was paid up to Port Sudan.

Our Keiki emphasized the word of the king with blows of his fist on the table of the harbor master and Alkuttabu menaced with an even faster clicking of his teeth—all to no avail. We had to pay. All our animals had been sold—for next to nothing, of course. Water costs ten times the normal price here, because it has to be brought from wells fifteen and twenty miles away. For who would want to drink the water of the White or Blue Nile?

When we calculated what we had left, both Master Jack and I had long faces. There was just enough to invite our four friends and escorts to a

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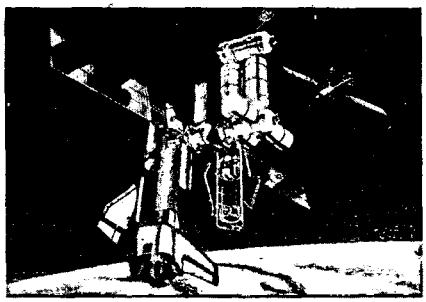

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meal. It was an unforgettable evening. I swear I would have started clicking my tongue myself if I had been with Alkuttabu any longer.

The next morning they rode away. We boarded the sailing vessel. There was a pitiful boat made of mimosa wood attached to the stern with which we were going to attempt to ride the cataracts. We had had a new thatched roof put on it and our packs and provisions of water and food had been put on board. It cost the equivalent of eight goats to have it float harmlessly behind the sailing vessel—an amount that an experienced caravan leader in Kotoko would hardly make in a month.

The master of the harbor was called Abu Medf'a, Father of the Cannons, because he had had the two tanks that had once rusted in front of the president's palace in Khartoum brought over the river and set them up in front of his official residence on the harbor, where they continued to rust. He appeared in a gala uniform when our vessel set sail. A band played the national anthem of Sudan and the green and white flag of the king was hoisted. It can't be said that we didn't get our money's worth of show as we left the edge of the world and set out into the unknown, into the swollen waters of the White and Blue Nile, the first now grey-green and the second yellow.

Extracts from the Journal of Master Jack

August 14th, 2036

They are making a great fuss here about the contamination of the river. I have measured its radioactivity. Even now with the water-level at its highest and with the rainfalls washing most of the radioactive sand of Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda into the rivers, the radioactivity is relatively harmless and can be tolerated without danger for weeks. On the contrary, the fuss is more of a lucrative business managed by the Father of the Cannons in cooperation with the Cavalrymen of the King and certainly with the King's permission and financial participation in the affair.

I told the master of the harbor that I had no intention of paying the enormous sum for the "protection from highwaymen, monsters and mutants" and that I was capable of defending myself. I told him that we would take our little Kheasaht bark and set off on our own. This was a punishable offense and he threatened to seize our boat and our provisions if I dared try. These cutthroats know how to protect their monopoly and always talk about the dangers on the other side of the edge of the world, which, of course, only they are capable of controlling. They do go on here about the danger of the water. If it were not so filthy with mud and slime, I would drink from it just to prove them wrong.

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One of the Tuweirat, his name is Hassan, told me that there are people living further down the river. Of course, most of them are ill, but who is healthy on the edge of the inhabitable world? Most of them are said to be light-skinned. They must be approached with caution as they are extremely resourceful in their invention of deadly weapons.

He also told us about strange lights appearing in the north, shooting up into the sky and falling back to earth like giant meteors. This certainly proves that there are space activities nearby which we have also noticed. Am I getting closer to my destination? Are there really extraterrestrial beings? For which country in the Near East would have the know-how and technical possibilities after the war which it had not had at its disposal before the war? But in the form of Horus? In the form of scarabs? The forms of Egyptian mythology? An unlikely coincidence.

The Tuweirat said that he hadn't actually seen any scarabs or bird-headed creatures himself, but that he was sure they existed. They had risen from Osiris Land, the Kingdom of the Dead, filled with indignation that the realm of the Egyptians had been wiped out and that six thousand years of culture had been swept into the ocean.

There are no historians left to ponder over the whys and wherefores of the deadly blast. When it happened, the war was in full progress. During the Iranian Civil War, sparked off by Khomeini's death, the Soviet Union openly assisted the Mujahedin with weapons and supplies. Operating from a base in the Yemen, the Soviet Union also caused the overthrow of the Saudi Arabian monarchy who were financing Bani-Sadr's mercenaries and ordered troop movements right up to the Iranian border.

The spark that set off the explosion did not go off in the Gulf, but in the Mediterranean. Just who it was who made a nuclear hell of the "Nimitz" will probably never be clear. It could well, however, have been land-based atomic rockets fired by Qadhafi—for favorable oil delivery contracts, anything could be had in the 80's; after repeated humiliations in the Gulf of Sirta by the 6th U.S. fleet, Qadhafi had threatened several times "to give a slap in the mouth to the Jews in Wall Street and their third-class extra from Hollywood!" Whatever happened, there were units of the Soviet fleet nearby—and the direct confrontation then took place. While the flames of war overran the Mid-East and the Gulf Region within hours and Europe within days and finally, the whole world, Qadhafi put his mad idea into effect of "drowning the capitalist jesters on the Nile," who kept threatening his border, and were only waiting for an excuse to take part in the invasion

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of the Libyan oil fields and make sure of a share for themselves. A few military planes actually succeeded in blasting the supposedly bomb-proof Aswan Dam—the rest, the dammed up waters took care of. 160 billion cubic meters—more than the Nile had carried in two years—thundered down the river valley. I have seen satellite pictures of this deadly wall of water, which fell as if in slow motion, wiped out Edfu, Luxor, Assiut, and finally Cairo before it poured over Alexandria and Port Said all the way to the ocean. The pressure of the waves, created by the masses of water, broke trees as if they were match sticks and whirled houses in its path as if they were leaves.

And then the silt came. Billions of tons of mud from the Nile, which had built up for two decades behind the 3600 meter long dam, was borne along with the outflowing water and covered the 40 million inhabitants of the valley like a brown shroud. It filled the Valley of the Kings, buried Cairo under a ten meter layer of brown loess deposit and covered the foundations of the pyramids.

Even the following year, the Eastern Mediterranean up to Crete and Rhodes was discolored and the high water, at some points over the five meter mark, had changed the outline of the coast extensively. The delta stretched far to the north like the tongue of an animal who had died an anguished death.

The Tuweirats and pilgrims have left us. They are taking the old route to Port Sudan. According to Master Jack, a thing on wheels had once rolled along it and, as unbelievable as it sounds, was able to travel the stretch of land to the ocean in one day.

The great sailing vessel has been made fast to a mooring. It is waiting for better wind. We, however, are moving ahead all the faster in the opposite direction because our wind is blowing from the south. Atbara is only a fort without inhabitants or garrison, because there is no water here except that of the Nile.

In the evening, we moor our boat at an island and sleep on the boat. Tomorrow, we shall attempt the fifth rapids. Apparently, we mastered the sixth with the great sailing vessel. I wasn't even aware of it. More than likely I slept through it.

"You are now leaving the country of the living," the captain had said ominously. "It is of your own free will that you are withdrawing from Allah's hand and are now entering the ancient Land of Osiris, the Kingdom of the Dead, from where there is no return."

That night, I closed the shutters of my life and could hardly sleep. I looked over the water moving and groaning along the shore as though

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it were really hurrying to the edge of the world to overflow into nothingness.

Suddenly, over the mountains to the north, I saw a flash of light rising in the moonlit sky, a small red gold tongue of fire which ripped a silver scar in the sky, a scar that soon disappeared, while the flash climbed higher, turning to the east and getting smaller and smaller on the eastern horizon.

I woke Master Jack and he followed the flash with his binoculars without saying a word. "Definitely a rocket being shot into orbit. Beschir, we have almost reached our destination."

All I could think of were the words of the captain and the edge of the world that the water of the river hurried to reach. I was frightened.

"Hey, Beschir!" Master Jack said the next day while he hoisted the sail on the mast and steered the boat into the middle of the river. "Why are you looking so grim? Real adventure is just beginning! Let's move forward into the unknown!"

The unknown was rocky shores that became higher and higher and closer together and water that moved so fast tearing our Kheasaht with it and making us dizzy. Then, suddenly the shores drew away, opening to let the river flow lackadaisically ahead.

In the evening we moored at an island called Mograhd. From there we could see the ruins of Abu Hammed further downstream on the right. During the night we saw a fire on the left shore and heard human voices above the murmuring water.

I wondered how human beings could live beyond the edge of the world. Or are they the dead out of the Land of Osiris? Questions one shouldn't ask at night. They weigh heavy on one like cold stones and sail away with the morning wind as if the sun had washed out their heaviness with its light.

However, the inhabitants of the river were very much alive, as we could see the next day. In a bend in the river, when we got too close to shore, we were shot at with arrows that splashed harmlessly in the water.

Master Jack got out his crossbow and held his quiver at the ready. But from noon on, we couldn't spare a glance at the shore; we had our hands full trying to cope with the fourth cataract as we were pulled deeper and deeper into its witches' cauldron, the Battn el Hadjar, the belly of stone. The river was now completely surrounded by black rocks. The water foamed with such a thundering noise against them that we could only make ourselves understood by shouting loudly and at times the broad river divided itself into several branches so fast that Master Jack had no time to decide into which he should guide us. Our boat shot blindly forward chafing along the banks. It was pressed, cracking and moaning, against stones as large as houses, came to a stop and then was suddenly

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yanked further. I crouched, drenched through, in the middle of the boat and bailed out water like a madman while Master Jack stood at the helm keeping an eye on the fairway before the bow. I didn't know whether I was trembling more from cold or fear. However, Master Jack seemed to be enjoying the hellish ride. I had never seen him so happy.

And thus we sailed on into the evening. The sun had long set when we came to quieter waters and looked for a place to moor.

We threw caution to the winds and lit a fire from the driftwood, dried our clothes and cooked ourselves a hearty meal of white beans and fried meat. The sun sank like a bloated rotten gourd. The sky remained bright hours after the sun had gone down, as if the western horizon were in flames making the river molten copper.

"The weather is changing," Master Jack said. He was right.

The next morning a cold wet wind from the southwest blew in our faces and we couldn't set sail. We let ourselves drift along, past deserted villages and towns. Sometimes, we even saw people, a hand was raised, a spear, and once we saw a boat lying on the shore, but no boats were ever let into the river. No one disturbed us.

Three days later, we took the next cataract. Far less hellish and dark than the fourth. The river is permeated with huge boulders. The torrent foams over these pounding up and down just as it would at the stern of a large ship. On some of the rocks there are ruins of fortresses and castles. Everything seems so dead. I wonder if Hazaz is alive?

Extracts from the Journal of Master Jack

August 27th, 2036

We have reached the basin that once was Lake Nasser, as one can see from the deposits on the shore. Palm trees and bushes line the shore. Sometimes human beings. I can detect many white men among them through my binoculars. Most are naked.

I am afraid to guide the boat to shore and meet them as, up until now, they have almost always reacted in a hostile manner, which is understandable. The struggle for survival must have been terrible, possibly including cannibalism. We shall keep to the middle of the river.

Sometimes, boats are to be seen, but we have not yet discovered any in the water. They are probably afraid of the contaminated river. However, the radioactivity is minimal. Perhaps biological or chemical substances. We haven't seen any fish yet. No crocodiles either.

* * *

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We are approaching Wadi Halfa.

The chute of the second cataract was the worst. The river tore along roaring and foaming between vertical walls left and right and we shot over it like an arrow. Hour after hour, I did nothing else but bail out water. Our boat, which groaned in all its ribs and joints, cracked and is leaking more and more. However, I am no longer afraid. Master Jack is a fantastic boatsman. "I have sailed down the Lualaba and the Congo," he said. "There isn't a river that I can't master!"

We sailed for days between dried-out clay walls, the muddy deposits of the dam through which the river had dug a new bed. All the colors were there in horizontal strips, red, ochre, brown and black. Master Jack explained that the different colored strata indicate the years. The view is beautiful. It would be even more beautiful if there were not this terrible heat. There wasn't the faintest breath of air and we felt like chickens in an oven. I had to control myself not to jump overboard and take a refreshing bath. Master Jack warned me that it could have grave consequences. He was right. My hands and arms that had touched the river water while I was bailing out the boat had begun to itch.

Towards midday, we saw the rusty remains of a broad box-like iron ship hanging out of the clay bank into which it had been baked, the bows sticking up, the crushed superstructure turned downwards. Again and again, we came upon the bones of animals and human beings in the sand and in the shallow water near the shore. Once we found a crocodile on a high sandbank. It was dead as a doornail and dehydrated like a dried fish.

Extracts from the Journal of Master Jack

September 1, 2036

We are approaching Aswan. It is an unforgettable spectacle. The dam is one of the most impressive ruins of the world. It is as if one were gliding in the hold of a giant super-tanker towards the bombed out bow, ten kilometers long and three and a half wide, jutting up to the left and right about one hundred meters. The river, although it is swollen from the high waters and is held back by what is left of the dam, seems like a small channel between the mighty flanks. There, where the water has broken through and has cut itself a channel, rusty reinforcements jut out of the wound up to the crown of the dam, where trees, the remains of boats, and numerous dead bodies had been caught, mummified by the sun. We let ourselves drift cautiously through this gruesome canyon. The water flows in a low cataract over the remains of the dam wall and accumulated debris

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behind it into a shallow lake strewn with blocks of concrete and broken pieces of machinery, the edges and corners of which are worn smooth and round.

Aswan no longer exists.

We spent the night just below the dam on a small island. In the morning, I brought Master Jack to shore. He climbed over the ruins of the dam the whole day, while I sailed the boat back to the island and roamed around it. It was sunset before he came back.

We stayed a second and a third day. Master Jack drew a lot of pictures in which every detail of the ruins of the dam could be seen.

The next day we hit upon a strange obstacle. It was a sort of curtain made of a white spun yarn hanging across the river from shore to shore. White root-like things held it to the shore. It spread over the surface and its web-like yarn seemed to hang deeply in the water. The most peculiar thing about it was that this structure moved as if it were alive. It pulsated, pulling itself together and then slackening again. We approached it slowly. It was a tenacious spongy web-like fabric over which the keel of the boat glided without any effort at all.

"Unbelievable," Master Jack said, feeling it and poking around with his ticker. "I am sure that this web is alive and that it is capable of cleaning the water. Once over the obstacle, radioactivity is almost nonexistent here. And the water seems to be substantially cleaner."

We passed over four such web-like obstacles in the course of the day. The improved quality of the water changed the appearance of the shore. Dry clay desert became luscious grass, shrub and palm trees. Goats could be seen, and thatched huts, and people appearing suddenly between the huts. We proceeded with caution to one of the islands, moored our boat and looked for a place to camp. On the other side, on the left shore, we saw goats in the river drinking the water. A naked man was standing near them, leaning on his spear. Master Jack called out to him. He didn't answer and disappeared with his goats into the bushes.

For the first time we actually dared to take a bath in the river. It was heaven. Master Jack scooped up a pot full of water and boiled it for a long time. Then he drank a drop. I held my breath as I watched him and prayed to Allah not to let him drop dead before my eyes. My prayer was heard. However, I decided not to let Master Jack out of my sight for the next few hours.

Night had not yet fallen when we heard shouting from the watering place. We were afraid of being attacked and, in the encroaching dusk, stared across to where the screams had come from. Master Jack looked through his glass.

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"It really is true," he whispered. "It is true."

"What, Master Jack?"

He gave me the glass and I looked through. With the artificial eyes the shore seemed much brighter.

I saw a confusion of bodies that encircled two creatures. They were hitting them with clubs, although the beings did not put up any resistance. The two figures looked like huge insects walking upright with dark brown shells and long feelers which grew over their faceted eyes like rams' horns and hung down over their shoulders and behind their backs, while their front limbs ended in scissor-like tools. It was amazing that these creatures, obviously so capable of defending themselves, hadn't made the least effort at resistance although they were being attacked with knives and spears. Finally, they were torn down and disappeared under a heap of naked human bodies. We could hear screams of triumph.

"What's that?" I asked breathlessly.

"Perhaps they are the ones I'm looking for," Master Jack answered. "I undertook this long journey because of them."

"Then, we have arrived too late, Master Jack," I said. "They are dead!"

He lifted his glass to his eyes. "My God," he whispered. "Why are they doing that?"

At that very moment a flash of lightning bathed the river and shore in a white glaring light. Blinded, we clutched one another while thunder erupted around us. I had never experienced anything like it before. When it died down, we could hear the cries of pain from the drinking place, but neither Master Jack nor I considered it the right thing to do to hurry to the aid of these savages in the darkness. The crying and moaning could be heard all night long from the other shore. We kept waking up again and again and the light continued to reflect in our eyes.

5
THE WEB

We ventured across at the first sign of daylight. Master Jack held his ticker carefully over the bow, but it didn't react. We couldn't find any signs of a fight. The first thing we noticed when we found the insect beings was that they in no way looked like scarabs or cockroaches. They were two-legged beings whose legs and bodies were covered with shiny dark brown exoskeletons. Their legs ended, like their upper limbs, in small, ribbed, three-membered pincers, which were obviously just as good for walking as for seizing or handling things. The strong armor of the backs and chests had been slashed through and hacked to pieces. There was very little left of the high domed heads and the large dark eyes

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except a grey and whitish mass of tissue. It was evident that the brains had filled most of the heads. They had been torn out and destroyed, probably so they could be eaten.

Nearby were eleven people, nine of whom were light-skinned. They were a pitiable sight. Most of them were still suffering from shock. They lay paralyzed where the fire had thrown them down. A few had succeeded in pulling themselves up enough to crawl to the shore and scoop up water in the hollows of their hands to cool their blinded eyes.

We moored the boat and went to help the wounded. Master Jack bent over a slight fair-haired middle-aged woman who was cowering naked on the shore. Her once voluptuous breasts sagged like empty calabashes over the water.

"Can I help you?" Master Jack asked.

"Hey!" the woman cried and slanted her head to be able to hear while her blinded eyes sought Master Jack. "Did I hear right, young man? Did you ask me if you could help me?" She laughed a stifled laugh. "Are you from the International Red Cross or from UNESCO or from one of those legendary relief organizations that we never heard of again?"

"Unfortunately not," Master Jack said. "They no longer exist."

"I thought so," the woman groaned with an ugly grin. "I can't see anymore because that thing spat its fire on us. Are you black or white?"

"What is that thing that spits fire on you?"

"That thing, it's that *thing*, you idiot. It's established its headquarters up there in the north and has covered everything with its web and lets its cockroaches swarm over the earth as though it had lost something.

"Listen!" She grabbed Master Jack's legs with vehemence. Master Jack put up no resistance at all, while I stared at the sagging breasts with a mixture of fascination and disgust. "I don't know who you are, but if you have any power at all—please kill it! That thing is responsible for bringing the holocaust to our planet to conquer it. It has destroyed mankind as if they were vermin."

"We destroyed ourselves, I understand."

"Nonsense! Never! They ordered the whole thing to happen. We are vermin to them. It doesn't respect mankind any more than it respects vermin. No more than you respect a worm or a sparrow that picks crumbs from the dirt at your feet. It respects you even less. It respects you like the dirt under your feet."

"You can't complain. The water is being decontaminated as far as I can see . . ."

"Not for us! For its brood of insects that swarm out of the earth. And it has just as little respect for them. It doesn't send them after us. It's only interested in the brains that it rummages around for in the earth.

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It is only interested in seizing the soul of the earth and loading its ship with it."

"Whose brains? Whose soul?"

"The brains of the people. The soul of the dead earth."

"Who says so?"

"Those who have talked to it. But don't believe," she mocked, "that you will get an answer from it so easily. Go up the shore! One of its ships is stranded there. Ask it! You'll get no answer. It will send its fire if you touch its biomass by mistake."

"Biomass?"

I was inspecting one of the strange containers that the insect beings had carried with them. When I laid my hand on the spongy, water-filled tissue, it twitched convulsively. Suddenly, out of the corner of my eyes, I saw how one of the men crept up on Master Jack from behind with a knife in his hand, while the woman still held on to his legs tightly. It dawned on me that it was a deadly trap. I grabbed one of the spears lying on the ground and hit the idiot over the head with the shaft as hard as I could. He sank down without saying a word. The woman began to shriek, pulled Master Jack down and threw herself over him. I hit her over the head so that Master Jack could tear himself away and she screamed and kicked blindly around her while her breasts bobbed up and down. The pitiable figures, insofar as they could rouse themselves, crawled threateningly towards us. I jumped into the boat and began to row wildly. Master Jack waded up to his hips in the water before he could pull himself into the boat. He gasped for air.

"It's a man's duty to help his brother!" a tearful voice cried after us from the shore. It was a young man, but with his bald head and his mottled skin he looked like an old man. "Whoever does not help his brother is on the side of that thing!"

"My goodwill to mankind is not that great. I am not willing to let myself be plundered and possibly eaten by you!" Master Jack shouted across to him.

"Be damned!" The young man called and the woman laughed her shrill laugh. I rowed as fast as I could.

Half a mile downstream Master Jack maneuvred back to the shore.

"I want to find out what this ship is doing here."

We dragged our Kheasaht up on land and hid it in the bushes. After we had covered our traces as best we could we set off up the slope overlooking the river. An hour later we reached the edge of the desert plateau and saw the strange ship no more than 500 feet in front of us.

It looked surprisingly fragile and was not half as impressive as I had imagined after all the tales we had heard about it. It measured perhaps 15 or 20 feet from bow to stern and was rather flat and raft-like without

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any high superstructure except for the small dome right around the stern.

"Almost like the cuttlebone of a cuttlefish," said Master Jack, who had stopped dead in his tracks beside me. A canopy had been set up over the stern and it fluttered in the wind. It was an unusually intense light color of blue that had something unreal about it in the grey brown surroundings.

Looking at the structure, I felt that I was confronted with a pitiable creature which had somehow foundered and was in difficulties. 25 or 30 insect beings were crawling around the ship evidently trying to get the thing in the air again, as the keel of the ship was grounded. A bird-headed creature stood in front of the ship, absolutely motionless, its arms crossed over its chest, staring at us silently.

I looked at Master Jack. He stuck his chin out with a determined look, placed the crossbow he had automatically reached for back over his shoulder and marched ahead. I followed him. My steps weren't long enough to keep pace with his. With every step we took—and this we didn't know at the time—we left reality, as we knew it, behind us forever.

Extracts from the Journal of Master Jack

September 5th, 2036

It's really true after all—the proof—extraterrestrial beings right in front of us! Although, for the past two years, I had always thought it possible and for the past few weeks was absolutely convinced that an immediate confrontation would take place, it now seems unreal and absurd.

The situation is more than banal in a distorted sort of way. Shall I pose as representative of what remains of civilization and bid them welcome with a speech full of empty words like the mayor of a city receiving the local magistrate of a foreign town, to seal twin-city friendships? I see myself rather in the role of father of a family whose visitors have arrived unexpectedly and who suddenly remembers that a fire has been raging in the living room.

Excuse us, please, but an accident has just happened in our historical development. We were faster in finding a solution to our arms problems than in finding a solution to certain racial and ideological problems. Some maintain that a death wish also played a role, a certain pleasure in the destruction of the world. I think they exaggerate. The truth is that the half-hearted as well as under-financed peace research proved useless when the run on the last resources of the world began. Then some of the veneer

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of civilization chipped off. Just look around you—you can see for yourselves. Fifty years ago, we were three or four billion more inhabitants. But let's not get petty about it. The truth is we can't estimate just how many are left that easily. One thing is certain—enormous areas of this once so beautiful planet will be uninhabitable for generations to come, some areas forever. We now have several million mutants with whom we shall have the greatest difficulties coming to terms, because our already contaminated gene pool will be messed up even more. Seeds of future discontent have already been sown. But let's not look at the whole of history in a negative manner. Let's try to be constructive. Let's say it had a regulative, if not cathartic function. We have bombed ourselves back to a level of civilization where we are—I hope—or are you of another opinion—more able to cope at our present stage of evolution. Don't judge us too hard; do be fair. We are on the point of rolling up our sleeves and cleaning up the mess. Let me bid you welcome. Do make yourselves at home . . . oh, pardon, I really didn't mean to offend you. It just slipped out. The Horus stood directly in front of me, a fascinating creature. Exactly as I had seen it in so many Egyptian drawings. The overly slender human figure with dark skin, the long delicate arms and legs, the beautiful sexless body, so perfect that it has something artificial about it, something artistic, the head with its superb blue green metallic plumage falling to its shoulders. However, most impressive of all were his eyes, hard, impenetrable black with an expressionlessness as unfathomable as polished obsidian. In spite of this, its eyes showed a certain intelligence, the uncompromising, cruel intelligence of a spy who was not impressed by appearances, eyes that in their robot-like, target-seeking field of vision absorbed every photon, but never gave any information about the receiver of all this data.

Between the curved, black, half-questioning open beak was the blue-black swollen curve of its tongue.

Horus, the falcon-headed one. Were the story tellers of Omdurman right? Have the gods of the ancient Egyptians risen from the Kingdom of the Dead, that realm to which they guided the souls and bodies of the pharaohs? Have they returned from the land of Osiris?

—

THOSE WERE THE BIOPRINTS OF ANOTHER VOYAGER. *I looked around and saw no one. Beschir looked at me terrified.* BUT HE ALSO CARRIED WITH HIM THE ONE YOU CALL HORUS.

"What's the matter, Master Jack?"
"Didn't you hear the voice?"
"No, I didn't hear anything at all."

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I ALWAYS FORGET THAT FOR YOU HUMAN BEINGS WITH EYES THERE MUST ALWAYS BE SOMETHING VISIBLE IN FRONT OF YOU OR ELSE YOU ARE IRRITATED. SIT DOWN, I'LL ARRANGE SOMETHING VISIBLE. THAT DEFECT SHALL BE FIXED IMMEDIATELY FOR I WELCOME YOU ABOARD.

With a penetratingly shrill clatter as if glass pearls were bouncing against one another at an amazing speed, the bow raised itself from the ground and sprang to and fro while the stern remained in the sand. Then the clatter died down and the bow fell back into the sand. In another attempt, this time with double the effort, the ship finally succeeded in getting into the air and hovered noiselessly about three meters over the earth.

The Horus raised its head as if listening to a voice that could not be heard by humans. Then he gestured to us that we should board the ship.

A sling was let down and I grabbed hold of it. It cramped itself together like a muscle and pulled me on board. Beschir and the Horus followed. The bottom of the ship seemed to be made of a spongy substance, the whole length of which was about twelve and the width four meters. Two to three dozen tentacles hung from it, some of them reaching the ground, while the upper part was tough and hard like a tortoise shell. However, it changed the moment we were let down and became elastic. Smoke began to rise between Beschir and myself, then a silky red feathery star blossomed forth from the smoke changing its form constantly until it took on the form of a sea creature. It swayed and waved in an invisible current.

THAT IS THE TENTACLE CROWN OF ONE OF THE TUBE-DWELLING WORMS OF THE REGION, *the creature said.* IN FACT IT IS VERY LIKE THE SHAPE I HAD FOR ONE GENERATION OF MY LIFE—A SHAPE WHICH I TREASURE VERY MUCH. I AM KA TEN, A VOYAGER AND I HEARD YOUR SARCASTIC "FATHER OF THE FAMILY GREETING." I LIKED IT BECAUSE IT WAS VERY TRUE TO FACT. I HAVE NEVER MET NATIVES HERE WITH WHOM I COULD CONVERSE. COME WITH ME TO THE NORTH AND BE MY GUEST. I HAVE READ YOUR MIND AND PRESUME THAT THIS WAS YOUR DESTINATION ANYWAY.

"Yes, you are right. We have been observing space activities in this region since the spring of 2034, but none of our signals were answered. Why . . .?" I RECEIVED THEM. IS THERE ANY REASON WHY I SHOULD HAVE ANSWERED? *It was the mouth of the tentacle crown that asked.*

I knew no answer.

The insect beings went to pick up our packs and bring them on board.

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* * *

Since we have been on board the flying ship, a feeling of unreality grows in me and the fear that I shall lose myself to this unreality. There are the insect beings, who take no notice of us, crouching in the slipstream with their feelers lying flat on their backs. There is the bird-headed creature, its arms crossed over its smooth blue-black breast, standing at the bow and keeping watch. But above all there is the mouth of the wavering blossom of the sea speaking to us.

All this is frightening.

I looked up at Master Jack. His face looked strange and was flooded with the blue light of the awning.

"You think you are dreaming," he said.

I nodded. We were surrounded by the desert, but nearby, not even a thousand feet, water began in which far off mountains hovered. The Lake of the Devil. Naturally, I knew what it was. I knew that it was a mirage and yet I was panic-stricken. The ghostly ship hovered, groaning in the wind, over the center of a grey island of light that had broken away from the land rising in the bottomless sky, a sky that had frozen into an expectant stillness. Then the island of light became smaller until in the end it dissolved into the air.

"Master Jack," I gasped and covered my eyes. "Please help me!"

The vision wouldn't move away. The succulent flower swayed and waved. The bird-headed creature turned towards me. I saw his toes for the first time. Instead of toenails, there were bent blades like polished blue-steel.

I fell down onto the shuddering tortoise shell of the ship which changed its form instantly under my very back, felt the pulse of the ship and stared up into the bright, fluttering sky of the canopy while I lost consciousness and the shrinking island of myself was flooded over completely by an oppressive darkness.

Extracts from the Journal of Master Jack

September 12th, 2036

Although the race of the voyagers comprises only a few thousand individuals, they have managed to infiltrate on a massive scale. They do not have any particular form, but go through different generation-changes, taking on physical forms in the water, on the land, and in the air. Forms that they can consciously manipulate after they reach a certain age; so that they can take on any form necessary at any particular moment. By means of a highly developed cloning technique and gene manipulation they are almost immortal, and because of their supernatural mental pow-

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ers are in a position to live in more than one body. Shortly after their appearance in the evolution of their planet, they caught on very quickly to the fact that they could use every living thing in their world as a biomass and remodel it for their own purposes. Everything from daily commodities to cars consists of genetically modified beings, whose form and function has been adapted to each individual need . . . their bioprints.

This highly developed art of gene manipulation made them ideally suited for space technology. The only part of the brain that travels is the part that contains the ego, with its storage zones of all the experiences the individual has lived through, all the experiences that make up the ego. All the rest on board is biomass—gene material necessary for building individual bodies and billions of identical clones that are used as helpers.

Just like the heraldic animals on coats-of-arms, each voyager carries his special bioprints around with him and surrounds himself with them. They are often fantastic constructions, biological works of art, whole biosets that in their composition are exactly tuned to one another, complement one another and form minibiospheres with their own chain of nourishment.

So this is the palace of the traveller of the stars, the voyager as he calls himself. I am looking along the white wall that stretches far into the night, into the maze of corridors of foam and webbed tissue which reaches far into the earth and in which hundreds of thousands of his insect servants are swarming in order to search for whatever is to be found in the buried city. They are called biotans, according to Master Jack—artificially bred animals and demibeings.

One of these mute beautiful beings in his brown armor is standing expressionless in front of my chamber and is looking at me with his soft, yet vulnerable eyes. He seems to be able to read my mind and hurries away to fulfill every wish immediately. Perhaps he really does read my mind, just as the traveller of the stars reads Master Jack's, and sends the answers to his questions to his brain.

It is pleasantly cool here in the web-like interior and, whether it is day or night, the walls of the corridors and chambers glow with light as if they were transparent and the bright sky were filtering through them.

Extracts from the Journal of Master Jack

September 19th, 2036

Six thousand years ago another voyager was stranded here. The reason is unknown. He had programmed the ship that waited in orbit to make

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its way home automatically if he did not return after a certain period of time. The ship went back without him. Ka Ten then set off to try and salvage his experiences, for he had roamed through unexplored regions of the galaxy for more than thirty thousand years. His brain must hold incalculable treasures of knowledge.

The most efficient natural knowledge carrier is the gene. Nature did not have enough time to develop methods of microminiaturization for memory and consciousness. For this purpose, all higher forms of life require the electrochemical storage capacity of what are still relatively large areas of the brain.

Our voyager is looking for this brain.

WHEN EF RE REALIZED THAT HE HAD FOUNDERED, HE WAS CONFRONTED WITH THE PROBLEM OF SAVING HIS EGO. HE HAD TO MAKE SURE THAT HIS BRAIN WOULD SURVIVE UNTIL ANOTHER VOYAGER COULD FIND IT AND COULD REVIVE HIS EGO BY TRANSFERRING IT TO A CLONE. IT SURELY CAN ONLY BE FOUND UNDER ONE OF THOSE GIANT STONE TIME MACHINES THAT HE HAD HAD BUILT. ONLY THERE WOULD IT HAVE HAD A CHANCE OF SURVIVING THOUSANDS OF YEARS WITHOUT BEING DESTROYED BY ALL THE WARS AND NATURAL CATASTROPHES.

"But why should he have had so many built?"

FROM OUTER SPACE, ONE OF THEM CANNOT BE DETERMINED IMMEDIATELY AS AN ARTIFACT. TWO COULD BE A QUIRK OF NATURE. THREE—ALL IN A GEOMETRICAL ROW—NEVER. EACH VOYAGER WILL BE ABLE TO INTERPRET THE SIGN IN A MATTER OF MINUTES.

"But dozens of pyramids were built in this country. Most of them truncated and not too beautiful to look at . . ."

That answers your question. There must have been imitators among the natives that he created. Perhaps he created a native clone and it produced human offspring. It is possible that he taught them how to preserve their gene material and their egos in order to salvage them at some time in the future in case they themselves foundered. He could have taught them how to preserve their gene material in the cells by mummification to prevent it from decaying. He also must have taught them that the brain, once taken out of the skull, must be preserved very carefully. But after his accident, the knowledge was perverted or couldn't be understood any more. The bird-headed creatures, who were originally given the tasks of preserving

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the brains, died out and only symbolically guarded the urns in which the brains and inner organs of the dead rotted and they chiselled the "names of the stars" of the dead into the sarcophagus, the "names of the eternal beings" who had long since become transient.

I roamed through the labyrinth of the traveller of the stars. The light in the interior of the web was always mellow. The walls gave off light whether it was dark outside or whether the day burned with desert sun. A fresh breeze flowed through the rooms and corridors, halls and chambers. Everything seemed very much unfinished, set up provisionally to be finished if necessary later.

There was a continual coming and going in all the corridors. The insect beings swarmed up and down with silent industriousness. They received the commands of the bird-headed ones via their feelers and worked with an accuracy and quickness that frightened me. They transported things they had found under the buried city. They were measured and catalogued. Works of art, technical equipment, anything and everything which seemed worth knowing and keeping for posterity.

I was in the control center of the palace where the bird-headed creatures sat with their special bioprints and all kinds of equipment, from where a continual data stream flowed to the space ship stationed just above us in the sky. There was a droning as in a beehive. It filled the rooms. Light zones flared up and went out again, clusters of storage crystals changed color when their inner structure changed, when knowledge was poured into them or taken out of them in order to make room for more knowledge.

I also discovered a room full of timepieces that the insects had dug out of the city. It was a rare collection which by far surpassed that of the king's palace in El Fasher. If you want to judge just how far a technical civilization has advanced, the voyager said, then have a look at their timepieces.

Sometimes, roaming around, I was sure that I had seen human beings, but they proved always only bird-headed creatures, who for scientific purposes had covered themselves in webs that looked like splendid old garments. At times their eyes had been altered by complicated lenses that looked like Master Jack's binoculars which could be altered as needed.

Once, a young woman sat across from me. She didn't move at all and kept looking at me thoughtfully, supporting her chin with her hand. At first, I thought that I had frightened her and wanted to lay my hand reassuringly on her shoulder, but, to my utter astonishment, my hand sank through her. The girl was only a figure made of light which one could actually walk through. Her eyes looked like round transparent

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glasses. If you looked through them you could see a glare of fire as in a forge.

Extracts from the Journal of Master Jack

September 28th, 2036

"But how could he have foundered?" I asked the omnipresent one. "With his ability for manipulating life, he must have been immortal here too."

HE WILL BE ABLE TO TELL US AS SOON AS WE HAVE HELPED HIM REGAIN CONSCIOUSNESS. EF RE WAS ALWAYS A GAMBLER. HE OFTEN TOOK UNNECESSARY RISKS AND ACTED THOUGHTLESSLY. IT IS POSSIBLE THAT HE CUT HIMSELF OFF FROM HIS SPACESHIP THROUGH CARELESSNESS. IT COULD HAVE JUST HAPPENED IN A MOMENT OF INATTENTION. HE WAS MORE CONCERNED ABOUT HIS OWN SPLENDOR THAN HIS OWN SAFETY. HE HAD A SPECIAL PREFERENCE FOR BIZARRE GENE MATERIAL. HE CARRIED CREATURES AROUND WITH HIM IN HIS BIOMASS WHO HAD NO OTHER FUNCTION THAN TO IMPRESS THE NATIVES. IF HE ENTERED A WORLD, HE DID SO ONLY WITH THE MOST COLORFUL POMP AND SPLENDOR POSSIBLE. THAT'S WHAT HAPPENED HERE. ONE HEARS, WHEREVER ONE GOES, THE DESCRIPTIONS OF HIS GROTESQUE BIOTANS. HE SEEMS TO HAVE USED THEM TO MAKE A LASTING IMPRESSION ON THE NATIVES.

I MAKE DO WITH TWO HELPERS: THE WORKERS I HAVE BRED OUT OF A VERY OLD AND UNIVERSALLY ADAPTABLE INSECT RACE, WHICH HAD A HIGHLY TECHNICAL CIVILIZATION WITH SIMPLE FUNDAMENTALS AT THEIR DISPOSAL OVER 500 MILLION YEARS AGO, AND THE GUARDS—WHO ARE AN IDEALLY DESIGNED HYBRID FORM MADE UP ORIGINALLY OF DIFFERENT RACES. EVERY VOYAGER CARRIES THEM WITH HIM IN HIS BIOMASS. YOU CAN RECOGNIZE THEM BY THEIR QUICK ABILITY TO LEARN. THIS PERMITS THEM TO TAKE UP DIRECT THOUGHT CONTACT WITH EVERY BIOLOGICAL OR ELECTRONIC INTELLIGENCE IN A MATTER OF SECONDS—OR TO CONNECT THEMSELVES TO IT IN ORDER TO GAIN A MAXIMUM OF INFORMATION AND TO PROCESS IT. WHEN I MAKE CONTACT WITH YOU IT IS ALWAYS THROUGH THESE BIOTANS.

I looked at the bird-headed creature who always accompanies me. Is it always the same one?

I awoke in the middle of the night because a great commotion seemed to have taken over the whole palace. I went to Master Jack's chamber but he was not there. He arrived a few minutes later and reported excitedly that the brain of the voyager had been found. It was still intact.

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Extracts from the Journal of Master Jack

October 14th, 2036

Now that the brain of Ef Re has been found, the omnipresent one is making ready for departure. The storage crystals on board the mother ship are insatiable. They store into the smallest possible space all the knowledge that the biotans have dug out of the rubble of buried museums.

Naturally, I have not been able to hide my wish to accompany him from the omnipresent one. But how will this be possible? He travels simply as a brain, leaving everything else behind him. He can create any form for himself from the gene material he carries with him and thus can travel with a minimum of biomass. What fantastic storage capacity! Such enormous amounts of genetic, chemical and electrophysical information in such a small space!

IF YOU DECIDE TO TAKE THIS STEP, YOU MUST BE CONSEQUENT AND GIVE UP EVERYTHING YOU EVER HAD BEFORE AND THROW IT BEHIND YOU. THIS LAW GOVERNS THE COSMOS.

"What could I give up?"

ALMOST EVERYTHING. EXCEPT PART OF YOUR BRAIN, ESPECIALLY THE CEREBRAL CORTEX. TECHNICALLY, THERE IS NO PROBLEM. ONLY THE YOU THAT STAYS HERE WILL HAVE PROBLEMS. YOU WILL HAVE THE FEELING OF LOOKING SIMULTANEOUSLY THROUGH TWO WINDOWS OF YOUR CONSCIOUSNESS WATCHING YOUR REAL EGO REMOVE ITSELF FROM YOU FOREVER. WOULD YOU WANT TO DARE THIS? DON'T SAY YES WITHOUT THINKING IT OVER CAREFULLY. IT'S NOT JUST AN ADVENTURE. IT IS POSSIBLE THAT YOU WILL REGRET IT. IT IS A MADNESS OF A VERY SPECIAL KIND.

I sleep very uneasily since I learned of Master Jack's innermost plans. It is very seldom that I even see him. When I do he talks a lot of bewildering nonsense and seems to be overjoyed. "Be prepared to give away all things of this earth." I see a web before me in which millions of Master Jacks crawl around. They are all speechless.

"This is the fantastic maze of a strange technology," he raves enthusiastically. "A technology of biology and parapsychology."

When can I leave this mad maze? I yearn for real human beings. The palace of the traveller of the stars is really like a web. Each impulse is transmitted somewhere where it is registered, and sets off a reaction.

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October 17th, 2036

WE HAVE A LONG JOURNEY BEFORE US THROUGH UNEXPLORED SPHERES. WE SHALL HAVE A LOT OF TIME TO ANALYZE THE DATA THAT WE HAVE TAKEN ON BOARD. YOU COULD BE OF GREAT HELP TO ME IN THIS.

I am prepared.

From the beginning of time man has always contemplated the intellectual being, the bodiless ego, the winged soul. What nonsense! The encephalographic basis is necessary: the stimulated molecules, the brain, the electrochemical short and long term storage space, a biological organ capable of analysing all matter, the sensorium. This instrument reacts to impulses that signal threat to or conservation of life, it "tickles the nerve," manifesting itself in hormones.

Individual consciousness cannot be duplicated. The brain is the ego, unique, indelibly marked by life, the pergament of the whole with all its conscious and unconscious engrams, with all its erasures and ink spots. Nevertheless, I am prepared.

Today, I was in the control center of the palace. It has changed completely. The walls have been torn down and high, arched windows let through the light of skies full of stars. The sky glows from time to time, lighting up the dark dusty haze and shrouding the dark red suns. Strange constellations glow through another arched window. Giant stars, clustered together, are linked sometimes with multi-colored bridges of dark matter and light. The control center is empty. The bioprints have disappeared. Darkness reigns and the glowing lights intensify the impression of unreality.

Master Jack says that we have been connected to the bird-headed creatures. My head is in fact about to split with the twittering of birds. They are confusing tones that I don't understand and they frighten me because they too are full of fear. The time for takeoff is getting nearer and nearer. Nervousness is growing. The traveller of the stars is moving on leaving his biomass behind.

Bioscrap.

Why did he create these mute beings? They live in a world that is far worse than the noiseless world of Simone.

I swore I would follow Master Jack to the edge of the world.

Now I am standing at the edge of the abyss.

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Extracts from the Journal of Master Jack

November 19th, 2036

What is this fist-sized cylinder that keeps reverberating in front of my brain? Subtly wired to the cerebrum and cerebellum, it pulsates life. A droning object, full of all my memories, like a recorder with the voice of a corpse, noisy impressions of a living tongue, spoken with the breath of someone who once was formerly alive.

Oh yes, I can certainly breathe. I have a pair of bellows sensitively guided by biomatical microprocessors. Yes, and a living heart that receives an impulse every 0.8 seconds, which gives it the signal to contract and—immanent to the system and obeying the necessary metabolic processes—gives it a powerful feeling of life. I have the best possible biomatically guided digestive system, which still gives a feeling of well-being although it is superfluous. It is really not my fault if this cylinder which pulsates inside my forehead still has difficulty identifying itself with me. A clever hormone guided drug deposit helps it with this task. For who am I then?

That is a difficult question.

In moments of lucidity, I know that I am not the one travelling to the stars.

I am the "dispensable" part of me. The necessary system for preserving life in the wilderness. The shabby scrap material of myself that was. Even if this droning metal in my skull never becomes tired of assuring me of my ego and my hope.

Master Jack asked me—it was his last wish—to accompany anything left of his former self back to the south.

We are sailing up the river together with a fair wind between the horrible walls of dark mud where the dead still go about their daily affairs. They hardly ever take any notice of us. For them, we are just travellers going back to another world, a world forbidden to them. They don't seem to mourn its loss.

I awoke and looked through the arched windows of the star traveller's control center. The desert lay covered by a night full of bright stars. I could feel a hand on my shoulder. "Wake up, Beschir! It is almost morning. We must be on our way. The spaceship is going to take off soon and all this will be consumed by fire."

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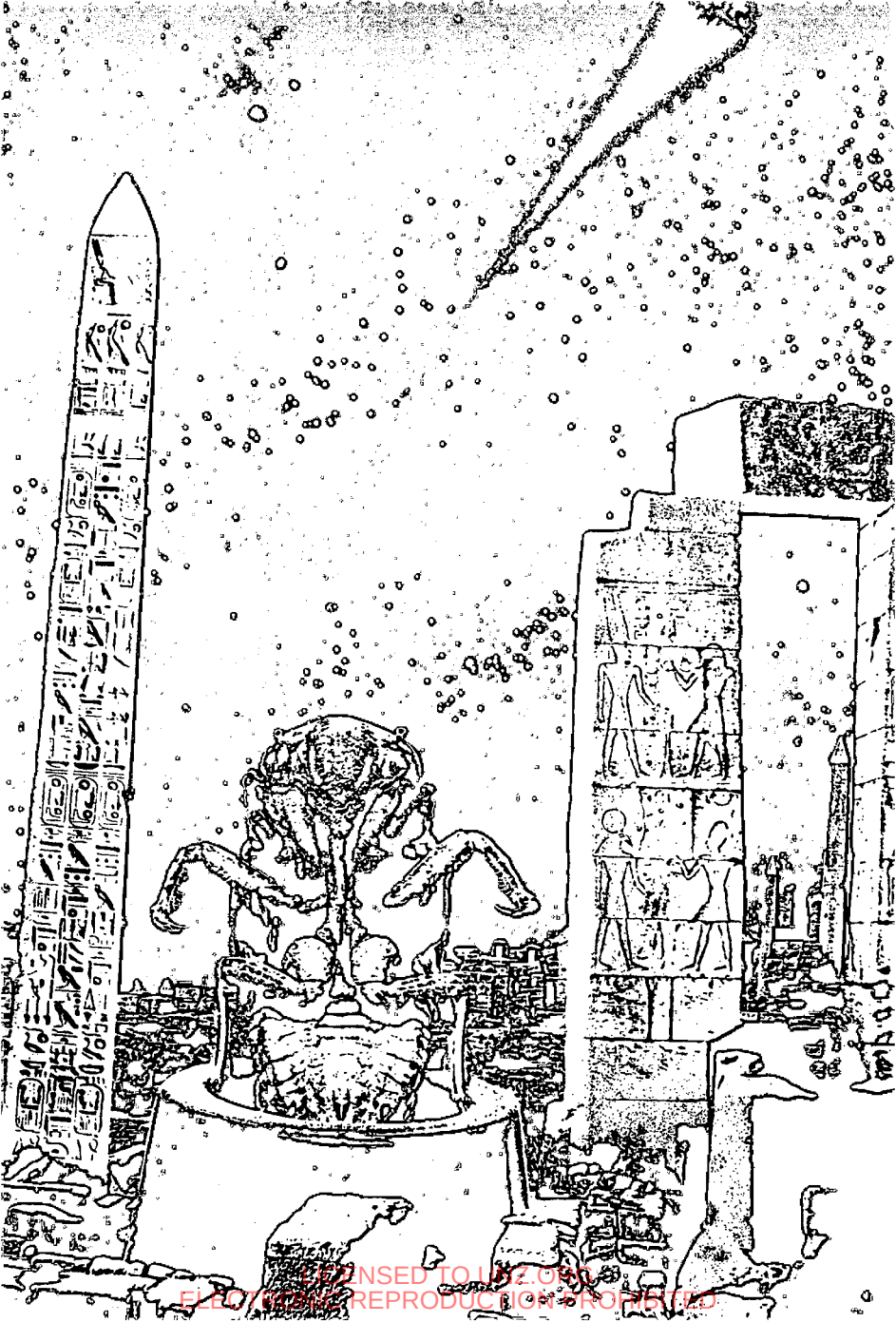

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Through the eastern windows, we could see the tender green of daybreak over the horizon. It was a sight that can be seen only on very clear days in the desert.

I got up.

"Is that you, Master Jack?"

"Yes, it's me. What's left of me," he said. He didn't have to convince me. His eyes, otherwise as clear as the sun, were filled with a darkness only to be found between the stars.

The traveller of the stars gave us a present of one of his ships with a crew of a dozen insect beings and one bird-headed creature cowering in the semi-darkness of the early morning.

With a great clatter, the powerful ship raised itself into the air and made its way off to the south.

Towards noon, a roaring sound erupted behind us accompanied by a stream of sparks which were consumed in their skyward flight.

In the evening; the first insect being dies and is blown overboard by the slipstream. We glide over the desert. Master Jack is crouching at the bow. In his eyes, there is the light of the stars.

The next morning, the deck of the ship is covered with empty insect shells and broken off feelers. The bird-headed creature is leaning against the helm, half-decayed. I sweep the chimeras overboard. I roll the stinking bird-headed remains to the stern and throw them off, taking over the helm myself.

Extracts from the Journal of Master Jack

November 22nd, 2036

Is this my handwriting? It really is. But aren't I trying to imitate the writing of someone else?

It is a madness of a very special kind.

Sometimes, it is as if I were not sitting at the bow of the ship which Beschir is guiding like an experienced sailor. It is as if I were sitting at an arched window with a view of the earth. The planet has hardly changed since the satellite pictures taken by the Apollo astronauts. A blue green oasis in the wilderness of the universe. The planet disappears far below us.

I can feel the powerful heart of the ship. The powerful heart of a young animal rising, pounding against the force of gravity and groaning against the force of the wind.

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Sidereal Time

At times, it is as if I were not here on board the spaceship, but on the ship Beschir is courageously sailing through the desert close over the surface of a sea of air. In the depth of my tank of impressions, my biosensors register that the sun is shrinking. Right next to the sun, I can make out the shape of Beschir, leaning at the helm. His dark face attentively looking forward. We are both leaving the solar system.

I sail this ship, this bark of our illusions, under a sky of burning stars, fly through grasshopper swarms and over the swell of the sand ocean, over the bone yards and Golgothas of civilization, through clouds of faded hopes and passions, over the ash fields, through a burnt out day and into the night and on up into the cool morning twilight. While a moon, sick and wasted like a rotten orange, stumbles morning after morning into the day.

I shall lay this ship, this bark of our illusions, at your feet, my King, at the bottom of the ocean that you rule over. For how shall I follow the course of a navigator who sees stars other than those I should navigate by? He crouches in the bow and keeps looking for flashes of light somewhere far over our horizons.

I shall lay this ship, my King, at the bottom of your ocean. An ocean without light even at the height of day. I shall lay this young powerful animal that pounds against the force of gravity and groans against the force of wind at your feet, my King.

I, however, widely travelled sailor that I am, must first explore my home waters once again, so that I, unlike Odysseus, do not succumb to the delusion that I am on my own shores only to be shipwrecked on foreign ones. For that is the problem—to seek new paths.

I am afraid.

Not the animal fear of life being threatened, but the fear of the experienced caravan guide, who knows that the A'alam he sees could lead him to an abandoned path whose wells have long since run dry.

EPILOGUE

A place is assigned me in the realm of the dead.
Where I issue orders to the blessed spirits
(Whose residence remains hidden)
And to the servants of the double-headed lion god.

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In the boat of the Khepra god, I speed through the firmament
Singing songs of praise. A breath of life nourishes me
And invests me with magic power.
As I travel through heaven in the Ra boat,
This god prepares my way and opens the gates of Geb . . .
And I embark in the boat of the sun god.
In your stead, I sail through the mansions of heaven
Midst the throng of spirits that surround it.
Truly, I live all the days of life, though dead,
I feel strength course through my veins
Like the double-headed lion god . . .

—Papyrus Nebseni

Mount Darwin Observatory
May 25th, 2039
Report

MASON (Radar Operator): "I can now verify the sensor indications."
STEPHENS (Chief of Security): "Please verify."
MASON: "I've got seven points on the monitor. Camera?"
HARDY (Camera): "Got 'em on the zoom. Four horses. Three people. Can't make them out exactly."
MASON: "Give alarm stage four."
STEPHENS: "Roger."
HARDY: "A man, dark-skinned, around his mid-fifties, one arm. A young man about seventeen or eighteen. Both leading horses. A white man about . . . my God, I've got him right in focus! It is Jack . . . Jack Freyman! Turn the fence off!"
STEPHENS: "Alarm off. Radar operator, turn the fence off!"
MASON: "Roger."

I wrote this in the winter of 2048 at the Mount Darwin Observatory at the request of Mr. Stephens and Dr. Hall. I am standing at my writing desk while Hazaz is pouring me tea. Master Jack is sitting at the window, touching his scar and looking through the displaced gates of his perception into the bright heart of the galaxy.

I have recorded this above all for him because I love him and for the caravan guides of the stars who have taught me not only to read and write but much more for our common future.

Beschir ibn Hassan el Sadun
November 19th, 2048 ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

I'm just back from the WorldCon, with news about upcoming editions of the big cons (ones held in a different city each year). Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists and fellow fans. For a later, longer list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 (long) envelope) at 9850 Fairfax Sq. #232, Fairfax VA 22031. (703) 273-6111 is the hot line. If a machine answers, leave your area code and number. I'll call back on my nickel. Send an SASE when writing cons. When phoning cons, give your name and business first off. Look for me with the "Filthy Pierre" badge.

FEBRUARY, 1985

15-17—**VikingCon.** For info, write: **c/oASWWU, Bellingham, WA 98225.** Or phone: **(206) 676-3460** (10 am to 10 pm only, not collect). Con will be held in: Bellingham WA (if city omitted, same as in address) on the Western Washington University campus. Guests will include: none announced so far.

15-17—**Boskone.** Copley Marriott Hotel, Boston MA. Damon Knight, Kate Wilhelm, artist Carl Lundgren—and somebody named Shawna McCarthy. The big Eastern regional con (2000 to 3000 expected).

15-17—**ConTex, c/o Friends of Fandom, Box 772473, Houston, TX 77215.** No more about this one yet.

22-24—**WisCon. (608) 251-6226 day, 233-0326 eve.** Concourse Hotel, Madison WI. L Tuttle, A. Austin.

22-24—**CapriCon.** Hyatt Hotel, Lincolnwood (near Chicago) IL. Frederik Pohl, Darlene P. Coltrain.

MARCH, 1985

1-3—**ConChord, Box 599, Midway City CA 92655.** Los Angeles CA. Clif Flynt. SF folksinging con.

1-3—**ConQuistador, Box 15471, San Diego CA 92115.** Hanalei Hotel. An intimate local convention.

8-10—**CoastCon, Box 1423, Biloxi MS 39533.** Alan Dean Foster, Mark Miller. Masquerade, book swap.

15-17—**NorWesCon, Box 24207, Seattle WA 98124.** Brian Aldiss, Robert Silverberg, artist Jack Gaughan, fan rich brown. This con usually draws over 100 pros (authors, artists, editors, etc.).

15-17—**LunaCon, Box 779, Midwood Sta., Brooklyn NY 11230.** LaGuardia Sheraton, Queens NY. Gordon R. Dickson, Don Maitz, Curt Clemmer. The dowager queen of East Coast cons (once, the only big one).

JULY, 1985

3-7—**WesterCon 38, 4812 Folsom Blvd. #125, Sacramento CA 95819. (916) 481-8753.** West's big con.

AUGUST, 1985

22-26—**AussieCon Two, 11863 W. Jefferson Blvd. #1, Culver City CA 90230.** Melbourne, Australia. The WorldCon for 1985. Gene (New Sun) Wolfe, editor/fan Ted White. Guests too numerous to mention.

30-Sep. 2—**ChiliCon, Box 9612, Austin TX 78766.** The North American SF Interim Con for 1985.

AUGUST, 1986

28-Sep. 1—**ConFederation, 2500 N. Atlanta #1986, Smyrna GA 30080. (404) 438-3943.** Atlanta GA. Ray ("Martin Chronicles") Bradbury, fan/editor Terry Carr, Bob (Slow Glass) Shaw. The WorldCon.

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(from page 21)

SOLUTION TO RELATIVISTICALLY SPEAKING

The reason a mammoth pair of scissors can't be used to send faster-than-light signals is this: When you wiggle the handles, the mechanical impulse has to go from molecule to molecule, and this transmission is slower than light. In relativity theory, material bodies are not absolutely rigid. Otherwise, you could send faster-than-light impulses by wiggling one end of a rod that extended an enormous distance. Unfortunately, the wiggle travels as a wave in the rod that moves slower than light.

Pulver was about to fire his cigarette when Tanya, the teenage daughter of the head of the *Bagel*'s computer division, came over to the table. "Haven't you kicked the smoking habit yet?"

Pulver shook his head. "I've tried several times on this mission, but I can't seem to hold out."

"I know an easy way to quit."

"I'm all ears," said Pulver.

"There are fifty cigarettes in that pack, right?"

"Right."

"Here's what you do. After you finish the first one—the one you're about to light—wait one second before you light the next one. After the second cigarette, wait two seconds before you start another one. After the third, wait four seconds, then eight seconds on the next, and so on. Just keep doubling the seconds. I guarantee you'll never finish the pack."

"Is that so? Why not?"

"Figure it out," said Tanya.

Pulver made some quick calculations on his computer wrist watch. He was astounded. How long would he have to wait between his 49th and his 50th cigarette? The answer is on page 109.

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MAROONED ON PLANET EARTH

by Thomas Wylde

© 1985 by Thomas Wylde

Jeff Schuster knew that therapy would change his life, but he hadn't bargained on exactly how far that change would go...

art: Robert Walters

"Why do you want to be an alien?"

Jeff Schuster smiled at the question. Wasn't it obvious?

The doctor leaned forward, perhaps to get a better look at Jeff's smile.

Jeff Schuster cleared his throat, and the doctor's head made a small anticipatory nod. But Jeff remained silent.

After a moment the doctor said, "I understand. You feel helpless, out of control, yes? Adrift in a lifeboat, perhaps. Rudderless. Becalmed under a broiling sun, yes? You feel your life slipping away, dribbling out, escaping into thin air. You want a purpose for living. You want life to be an adventure. Yes? Is that it?"

Jeff's head had started to nod almost from the first and was by now rocking up and down emphatically. "Yes!"

"You people make me sick!"

Jeff blinked, looked about him quickly to confirm he had not dozed and waked in another office.

"Do you know how to tell a human being from an animal?" demanded the doctor. "The human being is the one operating way below his potential. Look at a lion, look at a dog, look at a goddamn garden slug—they're all out there being what they are just as hard as they can. And you come sniveling along looking for adventure."

"Yeah, but—"

"Your life already *is* an adventure. It just happens to be a particularly

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boring and tedious one. You think the alien treatment will change things, yes?"

Jeff made an almost imperceptible nod.

"Mr. Schuster, the people I treat are in serious emotional difficulties. They're not looking for adventure. They're looking for *any* reason to go out that door and *not* blow their brains out. Can you match that?"

Jeff Schuster frowned and peeked at his disgusting and pointless life, at the sickening wad of his empty hours, at the dull black mound of hopeless depression that squatted on his chest. Could he match that? You bet.

He nodded, and showed the doctor his revolver.

"Fine and dandy," said the alienist. "That will be two hundred and thirty-five dollars."

While Jeff got up the money the doctor pulled some forms out of his desk. "Sign both copies. In four months you'll return for an evaluation. Don't worry about remembering, it's all built in." He quickly unfolded Jeff's hundreds and gave the bills a snap, peering at them briefly in the window's light. "Very good." He glanced at the signed forms, pulled a carbon for Jeff, and shoved the rest into a drawer. "Relax!" he said. "The next thing you know, you'll be waking up in bed tomorrow morning. And when you do—"

"I'll be an alien."

"Guaranteed."

"With a secret mission."

"Absolutely."

"And my life will be . . . interesting."

"Your life will be a goddamn Mongolian fire drill."

"Fair enough," said Jeff. "When do we start?"

The alienist's arm shot into the air and wiggled like a drunken snake. Then his fist opened and Schuster was staring into a battery-powered Hypno-lite®. Brilliance swelled to a fascinating conclusion.

And that was the end of Jeff Schuster.

As soon as Xgglm opened his eyes he knew the mission was doomed. What a *dump*!

Living quarters of some sort—squalid and rank and depressing.

Then he got a look at the body they had beamed him into.

That's it, he thought. *I'm out of here!*

He reached for his *yllna*, without which he was helpless, voiceless, marooned—and found none.

"It's a plot!" he said—then stopped, amazed at the disgusting sound of his new voice. Just his luck—marooned on a planet where "It's a plot!" sounded like the working of a defective toilet.

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For just a moment he felt such a smothering load of abandonment, such a dull black mound of hopeless depression settling down upon him, that he almost gave up right there.

"No!" he shouted. "NO!" he raged. "*NO!*" he bellowed.

There came a banging from the wall. And a voice: "Shut up in there, asshole!"

Xgglm approached and caressed the plaster. *Sorry.*

"On this forsaken planet the walls are very touchy . . ."

Bob corkscrewed his ship through the thickening lower atmosphere. The hull screamed, and alarms crawled over Bob's skin like tick birds, digging and nibbling.

The ship broke through the clouds, and an ocean swelled the horizon. Bob twisted the controls; the ocean shuddered and squirmed and slid away, replaced by forest.

A sandy hill rose from the foliage, and Bob dived his ship into it, melting and fusing as he went.

The ship slowed and swelled, then shrank, leaving a cavern puffed around it like the remains of a sloughed skin.

The ship cooled, ticking in the darkness.

Bob stretched and yawned. The alarms fluttered away, well-fed and smug.

Bob examined the status board in the smoky air. The ship was sick, but would recover in time. But for now he was marooned.

Bob sighed (in a manner of speaking).

He rolled himself out the hatch, filled the cavern with a substance resembling popcorn, and scrunched down in it.

With a shriek he set himself on fire.

Afterward he sent forth tongues to lick his crispy body.

Call it dinner.

The first order of business was to ascertain if this planet offered rocket propulsion. As Xgglm strained to recall the mission briefing, his eyes glided about the sleep chamber, assaulted at every turn by the jumbled contents; his olfactory filled up with musty vapors; his surrogate scalp tingled with a random native infestation—

"Arhgh!" he said. *This place is intolerable!*

Xgglm spent the next several hours removing distractions. He collected and bagged many pounds of fetid cloth, and used a sucking mechanism to gobble the dust and lint. (Xgglm considered the possibility he was destroying important ecological systems on this planet—possibly even sentient lifeforms—but what the hell, he was in a hurry. *Sue me!* he

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thought, as he toggled a device that sent a mass of mysterious material down the throat of a large white pedestal.)

Next he examined his unprepossessing host. Another mess.

Later, when he had consulted information storage devices in the nearby emporium called the "library," Xgglm confirmed that his adopted body was sheathed in excess poundage of subcutaneous gelatinous fatty cells. Fortunately, there was plenty of easily understood advice concerning the removal of this unhealthy mass, and Xgglm set about the task with enthusiasm.

He also learned that the brain of the beast—which he was forced to use—contained a vast and easily manipulated data storage and retrieval system, virtually empty at present. He commenced filling it with the contents of the library, for it was impossible to know this early in the game what bit of information might lead to his escape.

Xgglm concluded he might require an added measure of strength, so he put himself on a program of exercise and muscle building. As the body neared the maximum of its potential, Xgglm took it outside to cook its skin in the ultra-violet—a "tan" being highly prized by the natives.

Perhaps he *was* wasting time on this frivolous reclamation project, but certainly it couldn't hurt, and might eventually prove useful.

His first four months drew to a close, and Xgglm found himself—mentally and physically—nearing the peak of human perfection (such as it was).

All that had been easy.

Escaping this planet was proving more problematical.

What he needed was the equivalent of the Mother Ship shuttle-craft, which ran ten million miles on a pound of *any*thing.

Then one morning he looked in the paper . . . and found something even better.

Bob rolled around the cavern and bided his time.

Workers clambered over the ship, nibbling and stroking. Resuppliers daily returned from their forays, bearing water and food and toys.

Four tedious months had passed, and Bob was getting restless. He juggled the stone whose history he had been reading. He was bored, and absently shredded the stone.

"Excuse me," he said (in a manner of speaking).

The ship was nearly ready.

The group called itself The Extraterrestrial Propulsion Society, and was concerned with the location of alien spacecraft. There was no doubt—judging from the incredible accounts—that these flying saucers (as they were frequently called) were precisely what Xgglm sought.

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Within minutes he was on the Hollywood Freeway in his new Corvette. He got off at Roscoe, and was soon traveling east into the hills of Tujunga.

It was noon and the sun was hot, the air spicy with sage from the chaparral. He pulled up in front of the house listed in the newspaper. A semi-wild beast coughed from behind a metal mesh barrier. Xgglm listened, but could make no sense of it.

He rang the bell philosophically. (Sometimes it produced results, sometimes not. One took one's chances.)

Noises came forth . . . and the door swung open. "Yes?"

It was a female, and Xgglm was hammered by a sudden urge to mate. "I . . . uh . . . is this . . ."

"My god," she said. "It's Jeff Schuster."

Pre-flight checks began inauspiciously, as the fuel refused to budge from the holding tank. Bob had to go down there personally and talk to it. Some kind of union hassle, but he got it straightened out.

The ship cooed and hummed and spat anomalies from the walls, which were chased down by repair crews still hung-over from the bon voyage party. (Some of the repair dudes were so befuddled they joined up and became anomalies themselves. Bob was kept busy.)

"This is a goddamn Mongolian fire drill," he said (allowing for the windage of translation).

"Who?" said Xgglm, rapidly searching his memory files. Jeff Schuster . . . Jeff Schuster . . .

"Beverly Newton," she said. "We were in high school together. But then you were . . . God, you look great now."

Xgglm grinned the grin he learned from Indiana Jones.

It didn't matter who Jeff Schuster was. The important question was this: Would Beverly Newton consent to mate with Jeff Schuster's body? The signs looked good.

They went into the kitchen, where she was required to stir a vat of steaming chili. "Wanna beer?"

Xgglm nodded. Anything, Beverly.

He almost lost track of his mission. "Flying saucers!"

Beverly handed him a Light and displayed on her face a serious arrangement of her features. "It's my life."

She gave him lots of sinus-reaming chili and more Light beer and then dragged him into the sleep chamber.

The ship squealed and shut itself down.

Bob made a grumbling sound, and the overheads came on, spraying fluorine. "Not now," he said (more or less).

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Smoke puffed from the control panel, spelling disaster.

Bob reached out and rearranged some of the characters, spelling out: "What?" More smoke came from the panel, and that told the story. Bob settled back and read the story.

More delays.

He shook his head until it fizzed.

"You know," said Beverly, "in school I used to think you were a wonk." She smiled. "Now I'm sure."

Xgglm stared at the ceiling of the sleep chamber.

She said, "What the hell were you trying to do?"

"It was my first time."

"I believe you."

"Did I do it wrong?"

"You set a record for doing it wrong."

"Perhaps if you showed me what you want me to do."

"You think it would help?"

"I'm a fast learner."

Absolutely.

Half an hour later she lay gasping. "Far out!"

About an hour after that there was a meeting of The Extraterrestrial Propulsion Society in her living room. She put out coffee and Oreos. Four humans had come to talk about flying saucers.

Xgglm was amazed at the depth of their knowledge.

Wayne, who was sixteen and apparently cut his own hair, leaned forward and spoke very fast about a sighting in the Mojave Desert. He played a tape of a conversation with a policeman, but it was garbled by high wind and faulty tape recorder batteries.

"That's significant," said Jackie, who was a grey-haired grandma of 70.

"Right," said Fred, who was about 40, but seemed to be Jackie's boyfriend. "They got a beam that screws up batteries."

"I bet it wasn't even that windy," said Beverly.

Everybody nodded.

"That's the cincher," said the one called Julie. She kept looking at Xgglm, and he was whacked in the back of the head by another powerful urge to mate.

Wayne crushed an Oreo in his teeth. "That's not all. Not fifty miles from there I came across another sighting. Maybe four months ago. Some old coot said it dived right into the side of the mountain and never made a mark."

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"Right," said Fred. "They got a beam that lets 'em do that. Huh, Jackie?" He patted her thigh.

"What's significant," said his girlfriend, "is that there is not a *scrap* of evidence."

"That's the cincher," said Julie, smiling at Xgglm. Beverly leaned over and smacked him on the head.

There it is again, he thought.

"That's their trademark," said Jackie.

"I think we're on to something," said Fred.

Everybody nodded.

Julie smiled at Xgglm.

Beverly yanked him out of his chair and they went into the kitchen to make more Oreos.

"This is all so fascinating," he told her.

"I'll just bet it is."

When Xgglm got back into the living room Wayne was organizing a field trip out to the mountain where the saucer landed. He handed Xgglm a clip-on air gauge. "You're in charge of tire pressure," he said, looking very grave. Xgglm nodded, and stared at the tire gauge.

This was it. His ticket out of this hole.

While the ship cheerfully baked the final repairs, Bob lolled before the viewer and watched *The Pia Zadora Hour*.

One more day.

The ship assured him all would be well.

Bob took hostages from the pantry, just in case.

No more Mr. Nice-guy.

Wayne's Buick sat steaming in the bright morning sun.

"At least it got us here," he said, grinning.

Unfortunately, "here" was in the middle of nowhere, at the end of a rutted dirt road that banged straight into the sandstone face of an upwelling mountain.

The Extraterrestrial Propulsion Society spread out and kicked rocks. There was no shade (excepting the shadow of the Buick). Fred poked at Jackie and made her giggle.

Julie popped up beside Xgglm. "Bet you could fix it."

"Maybe if it was a hyper-spatial runabout of the *Zllg* class," he might have said, but didn't. (And in that moment of private joke it seemed to him—when he really *looked* at it—that the very *concept* of a hyper-spatial runabout of the *Zllg* class meant nothing to him, was in fact the *apex* of alienness.)

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"We'll let Wayne mess with it," he said. "Why don't we do what we came here for?"

A vote followed, and it was decided they would form into teams. Fred and Jackie and Wayne would stay with the car and nibble sandwiches. Xgglm and Julie and Beverly would take the first scouting excursion up the mountain.

"It'll be *fun!*" said Julie, tugging at one of Xgglm's belt loops.

He smiled cautiously, aware of Beverly's jealous stare. His urge to mate with Julie was keen as ever, especially now that he knew how to do it.

But something else was nagging at him. He had the damnedest feeling he ought to be checking in with somebody, as if he had an appointment of long standing that was just at the tip of lost memory.

"Come on, stud," Beverly said, taking his hand.

They started up the hill, slipping and skidding on the loose rock, following the contours in sweaty silence.

Up close the slope was rugged and choppy, not at all the smooth rounded bump it had seemed from miles out. If any flying saucer had dived through here the signs were absolutely obliterated.

Xgglm began to doubt the usefulness of this approach.

All the while he climbed, the sense of urgency grew within him. Damn it, he was *late* for something, but he didn't know what. He was supposed to *be* someplace—right *now*—but he didn't know where.

"Take a break!" Julie said, wheezing.

They stopped and crouched and sweated in the glaring sun.

"Julie was right," said Beverly. "This *is* fun!"

The women exchanged bitchy looks.

Then the mountain began to move.

Bob had commanded the mountain to move, and it moved.

"At last!" he might have mumbled. (Who can be sure?)

Then the mountain stopped.

Bob turned colors appropriate to frustrated rage.

The ship conjured an image: there were beings perched on the slope just above them.

The nose of the ship poked out of the dirt and sniffed. The beings scurried about in a random pattern, then settled down. One in particular seemed boldest.

Filthy native.

Xgglm approached the thing that had edged out of the mountain. He had little doubt. It was a transportive device buried in there. And he knew he had to catch a lift.

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Perhaps, he thought, *my sense of being late for an appointment is connected to this. Maybe I'm wanted aboard the Mother Ship. Where else could I be wanted?*

The women had stopped running when they saw he was standing his ground. Julie shouted that he possessed "balls," which Xgglm found simultaneously mystifying and gratifying.

The snout of the saucer glinted in the sunlight, quivering. Xgglm walked directly to it and began to knock.

The mountain trembled.

Xgglm sensed the women coming up close behind him.

Julie said, "Isn't he magnificent?"

And Beverly said, "You brown-nosing little . . . hey!"

The gleaming metal snout had split open.

Without hesitation Xgglm ducked and stepped between the gaping lips.

"Wait for me, tiger," Julie said, following.

Beverly dawdled a moment, looking back at the Buick and at the tiny folk staring up and waving at her. Then she said, "Shit," and stepped through in pursuit of her man.

The passageway was low and curvy, leading down into the mountain—and into the body of the saucer.

Xgglm walked quickly, a strong sense of purpose clamped down hard over his rational mind. The women tagged along, Julie holding onto his belt.

The light dimmed and then brightened, and the walls and ceiling retreated until the passageway had become roomy. At a turning they found a chamber of colors and lights and mechanisms and . . . a being . . . a humped, glistening, vibrating . . . *thing* . . .

Xgglm cleared his throat—

—and all the lights went out.

Bob watched the intruder swagger into the control room like he owned the dump.

Then—quite casually—the beast ordered the ship to turn out the lights.

Bob was stunned.

He shifted his visual spectrum a smidge and scrutinized the three natives. They seemed agitated. And dangerous.

Bob cautiously ordered the lights brought up. The animals directed the bumpy side of their heads at him.

Then the cocky one stepped forward and—

Xgglm pulled Wayne's tire pressure gauge out of his pocket and pointed

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it at the alien. "Fire this sucker up, Big Boy. I wanna get to the Mother Ship."

Julie said, "Talk about a take-charge kind of guy!"

"Oh, give it a rest," said Beverly.

Xgglm stepped close to the monster and pulled the graduated slide out of the end of the tire pressure gauge.

"Don't make me use this!"

Bob observed the simple-looking but no doubt devastating weapon pointed at his tender bodily portions.

There was nothing to do but haul these bold stowaways—these alien hijackers—into space. After which . . .

The wide lump of slime in the center of the room started to hum and cough—and the ship became transparent.

A moment later the dark rock of the inside of the mountain flashed aside and they were flying free, speeding away from the mountain.

Xgglm caught the briefest glimpse of the big blue Buick at the base of the slope—then they were gone, darting into the sky at a sickening rate.

He swayed on his feet, suddenly quite dizzy. The business end of his make-shift weapon wobbled irresponsibly.

Bob kept (the equivalent of) an eye on the stranger's weapon. What was that idiot doing? The weapon weaved and darted, out of control. Bob began to sweat mercury.

"It's all over," he said (I suppose).

His ship was in the hands of a maniac, and there was nothing he could do. He was ruined, his career a shambles. There was only one honorable course of action.

Bob puddled and flowed up the walls of the ship, momentarily obscuring the view as his hijacked ship blasted its way out of the atmosphere and threaded through the jumble of space garbage that shrouded the planet.

When he was spread out to the thickness of Mrs. Butterworth's syrup, he burst into flame and burned himself out.

The light was dazzling—

—and Xgglm staggered, his brain seared, his memory scrubbed, his alien personality melting in the glare.

The women were screaming, but by the time he could hear them, he no longer was sure who they were or why they were screaming.

He blinked, the memory of the hypnotic light glowing like a coal in

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his brain. He looked in his hand and found the tire gauge. It said "Bud's Arco—Geyserville, CA" on the shaft. A moment ago he had been doing something quite desperate with that device—now it was just a vague memory.

Jeff Schuster looked around the ship.

As the afterglow of the violet light faded, he saw through the walls of the transparent ship—and beheld the cosmos.

Julie said, "You really did a number on that guy!"

Jeff stared at her, amazed by the look of admiration he found on her face. *Nobody* had ever looked at him that way.

He cleared his throat, noticed that Beverly was, well, *jealous*. Jeff shook his head, dumbfounded.

He looked at his body, saw that it was slim and muscular and tanned—in short, the body he'd always dreamed of having.

What the hell is going on?

Then he remembered the alienist and the hypno-therapy and the startling morning he woke convinced he was Xgglm and marooned on the planet Earth.

Well, he had made it off the Earth. Congratulations.

Tiny wet creatures came up out of the floor of the ship and began to sniff at his legs. This was *his* spaceship, now.

Beverly said, "Okay, Jeff, what do we do?"

"Uh . . ." The scene of empty space—the Earth a cloudy blue eyeball in the distance—made him sick, but there was no getting away from it. More and more "animals" materialized out of the floor or hung down in his face, touching him tenderly.

What have I done?

"Look at that," said Julie.

A cloud of green smoke drifted by, packed with motion—images, characters, script of some kind. The ship was apparently trying to communicate with him.

Jeff said, "Uh . . ."

Next came a concussion of sound—squeals, hiccups, groans, and squawks. The smoke turned red, the images pranced, the ship roared and squabbled.

"You're the goddamn hero," said Beverly. "*Do* something!"

Jeff groaned.

Who was that idiot that wanted a life of adventure?

"Jeff?" said Julie. "Don't kid around, okay? What are we going to do?"

He turned in time to see the Earth shrink to a dot and disappear into the background of stars.

He closed his eyes and tried to force himself back into the persona of the alien whose name he couldn't pronounce, to recapture the comic sense

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that the world was new and mysterious and full of promise, that life *was* an adventure—

And when he opened his eyes he was . . . Jeff Schuster.

Naturally he fainted.

When he awoke there were soft wet beasties all over his body and soothing voices in his head.

He opened his eyes, saw the women off in a corner, talking low and pointing at him. He sighed. His confidence was shattered, his cover blown. It didn't matter how well developed his body had become, or how full of useless information Xgglm had pumped his brain; he was still pretty much the nerd he always was.

He closed his eyes and thought about a time in high school when everybody was busy picking careers and life goals. It had seemed so stupid, all that "serious" talk. His plan was to invent some kind of space drive and spend his life exploring fine new empty planets. Didn't that make more sense than signing up for careers in wholesale plumbing supplies?

But somehow he never got around to building that backyard saucer. And life just sort of wandered over and sat down on him. How wonderfully typical.

Jeff Schuster—squashed by life.

Just a regular guy after all.

And now this final irony; his own damn saucer and he was scared shitless.

He stood up, wobbling just a bit. The women looked at him sullenly. Beverly said, "Welcome back, hero."

Liquid voices filled his skull with vague information. He cocked his head, listening. "I don't know if we'll ever get back to Earth," he said.

The women exchanged morbid looks of astonishment.

"The way I understand it," he said, "we're going to some kind of flying saucer base so I can make a report. We'll probably be the only humans there."

Julie looked as if she were about to cry.

"It's up to us to give the best impression we can," he said. "It might even be important, I don't know." He added: "I guess I should apologize for dragging you guys out here."

Julie smiled tentatively. "Maybe it'll be fun."

He just stared at her. "You must be out of your mind. We're probably all going to die—a long way from home."

Beverly said, "That's the way it always works, Jeff."

"But that's so . . . pointless!"

"So what?"

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He thought about that, and the wet animals that slithered over his body helped him to sort it out.

He was still marooned, still becalmed, still laid out cold on an operating table of his own design. And in his hand: the scalpel, the tool, the revealed map of his salvation's course . . . a path that always led back home—to a man obliged to create out of nothing a point to life.

Maybe I'm trying too hard.

He took a deep breath and opened his eyes to the transparent walls of his new home. *Few people get this chance.*

He slowly shook his head, and was surprised by a smile.

"We'll see," he said.

All around him stars drifted across the empty center of the universe, a place he filled as best he could. ●

MARTIN GARDNER (from page 95)

SECOND SOLUTION TO RELATIVISTICALLY SPEAKING

The doubling series—it consists of the consecutive powers of 2—increases at what mathematicians call an exponential rate, reaching enormous numbers much sooner than seems possible. Between the 49th and the 50th cigarette the elapsed time would be 281,474,976,710,656 seconds. There are 60 seconds to a minute, 60 minutes to an hour, 24 hours to a day, and 365 days to a year. (We ignore leap years to simplify the calculation.) To convert the time in seconds to time in years we must divide by $60 \times 60 \times 24 \times 365 = 31{,}536{,}000$. The result is more than 8,925,512 years!

Actually, Pulver would probably kick the habit after his 25th cigarette because he would have to wait more than six months before he smoked the next one. Suppose you wanted to determine the total of all waiting times up to a certain power of 2. Would you have to add all the powers to get the sum? No, there is a marvelous short cut. If you can't figure it out, look at page 119.

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art: Allen Koszowski

PRAXIS

by Karen Joy Fowler

"Praxis" is Karen Joy Fowler's first fiction sale. In addition to stories, she writes poetry and a weekly column on school events for her local newspaper. Ms. Fowler also teaches dancing and movement to very tiny children, and lives in Davis, California with her husband and two children.

The price of a single ticket to the suicides would probably have funded my work for a month or more, but I do not let myself think about this. After all, I didn't pay for the ticket. Tonight I am the guest of the Baron Claude Himmlich and determined to enjoy myself.

I saw *Romeo and Juliet* five years ago, but only for one evening in the middle of the run. It wasn't much. Juliet had a cold and went to bed early. Her nurse kept wrapping her in hot rags and muttering under her breath. Romeo and Benvolio got drunk and made up several limericks.

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I thought some of them were quite good, but I'd been drinking a little myself.

Technically it was impressive. The responses of the simulants were wonderfully lifelike and the amphitheater had just been remodeled to allow the audience to walk among the sets, viewing the action from any angle. But the story itself was hardly dramatic. It wouldn't be, of course, in the middle of the run.

Tonight is different. Tonight is the final night. The audience glitters in jewels, colorful capes, extravagant hairstyles. Only the wealthy are here tonight, the wealthy and their guests. There are four in our own theater party: our host, the Baron; his beautiful daughter, Svanneshal; a wonderfully eccentric old woman dressed all in white who calls herself the Grand Duchess de Vie; and me. I work at the university in records and I tutor Svanneshal Himmlich in history.

The Grand Duchess stands beside me now as we watch Juliet carried in to the tombs. "Isn't she lovely?" the Duchess says. "And very sweet, I hear. Garriss wrote her program. He's a friend of the Baron's."

"An absolute genius." The Baron leans towards us, speaking softly. There is an iciness to Juliet, a sheen her false death has cast over her. She is like something carved from marble. Yet even from here I can see the slightest rise and fall of her breasts. How could anyone believe she was really dead? But Romeo will. He always does.

It will be a long time before Romeo arrives and the Baron suggests we walk over to the Capulets' to watch Juliet's nurse weeping and carrying on. He offers his arm to the Duchess though I can see his security cyber dislikes this.

It is one of the Baron's own models, identical in principle to the simulants on stage—human body, software brain. Before the Baron's work the cybers were slow to respond and notoriously easy to outwit. The Baron made his fortune streamlining the communications link-up and introducing an element of deliberate irrationality into the program. There are those who argue this was an ill-considered, even dangerous addition. But the Baron has never lacked for customers. People would rather take a chance on a cyber than on a human and the less we need to depend on the poor, the safer we become.

The Duchess is looking at the cyber's uniform, the sober blues of the House of Himmlich. "Watch this," she says to me, smiling. She reaches into her bodice. I can see how the cyber is alert to the movement, how it relaxes when her hand reappears with a handkerchief. She reverses the action; we watch the cyber tense again, relaxing when the hand reemerges.

The Baron shakes his head, but his eyes are amused. "Darling," he says, "you must not play with it."

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"Then I shall walk with Hannah instead." The Duchess slips her hand around my arm. Her right hand is bare and feels warm pressed into my side. Her left hand is covered by a long white glove; its silky fingers rest lightly on the outside of my arm.

The Baron precedes us, walking with Svanneshal, the cyber close behind them. The Duchess leans against me and takes such small steps we cannot keep up. She looks at the Baron's back. "You've heard him called a 'self-made man'?" she asks me. "Did it ever occur to you that people might mean it literally?"

She startles me. My eyes go at once to the Baron, recognizing suddenly his undeniable perfection—his dark, smooth skin, his even teeth, the soft timbre of his voice. But the Duchess is teasing me. I see this when I look back at her.

"I like him very much," I answer. "I imagine him to be exactly like the ancient aristocracy at their best—educated, generous, courteous . . ."

"I wouldn't know about that. I have never studied history; I have only lived it. How old would you guess I am?"

It is a question I hate. One never knows what the most polite answer would be. The Duchess' hair, twisted about her head and held into place with ivory combs, is as black as Svanneshal's, but this can be achieved with dyes. Her face, while not entirely smooth, is not overly wrinkled. Again I suspect cosmetic enhancements. Her steps are undeniably feeble. "You look quite young," I say. "I couldn't guess."

"Then look at this." The Duchess stops walking and removes the glove from her left hand. She holds her palm flat before me so that I see the series of ciphers burnt into her skin. IPS3552. It is the brand of a labor duplicate. I look up at her face in astonishment and this amuses her. "You've never seen anything like that before, have you, historian? But you've heard perhaps how, in the last revolution, some of the aristocracy branded themselves and hid in the factories? *That's* how old I am."

In fact, I have heard the story, a two-hundred-year-old story, but the version I know ends without survivors. Most of those who tried to pass were detected immediately; a human cannot affect the dead stare of the duplicates for very long. Those few who went in to the factories gave themselves up eventually, preferring, after all, to face the mob rather than endure the filth, the monotony, and the endless labor. "I would be most interested in interviewing you," I say. "Your adventures should be part of the record." *If true,* but of course that is something I do not say.

"Yes." The Duchess preens herself, readjusting an ivory comb, replacing her glove. We notice the Baron, still some distance away, returning to us. He is alone and I imagine he has left the cyber with Svanneshal. The Duchess sweeps her bare hand in the direction of the hurrying figure. "I am a true member of the aristocracy," she tells me. "Perhaps the only

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surviving member. I am not just some wealthy man who chooses to call himself *Baron.*"

This I discredit immediately as vanity. Revolution after revolution—no one can verify a blood claim. Nor can I see why anyone would want to. I am amazed at the willingness of people to make targets of themselves, as if every time were the last time and now the poor are permanently contained.

"I must apologize." The Baron arrives, breathless. "I had no idea you had fallen so far behind."

"Why should you apologize," the Duchess chides him, "if your guest is too old for such entertainments and to proud to use a chair as she should?" She shifts herself from my arm to his. "Verona is so lovely," she says. "Isn't it?"

We proceed slowly down the street. I am still thinking of the Duchess' hand. When we rejoin Svanneshal it is as though I have come out of a trance. She is so beautiful tonight I would rather not be near her. The closer I stand, the less I can look. Her eyes are very large inside the dark hood of her gown which covers her hair and shoulders in a fine net of tiny jewels. In the darkened amphitheater the audience shines like a sky full of stars, but Svanneshal is an entire constellation—Svanneshal, the Swan's throat, and next to her, her father, the Dragon. I look around the amphitheater. Everyone is beautiful tonight.

Juliet's nurse is seated in a chair, rocking slowly back and forth in her agony. She is identical to the nurse I saw before and I tell the Baron so.

"Oh, I'm sure she *is* the one you saw before. I saw her once as Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie.* You didn't imagine they started from scratch every time, did you? My dear Hannah, anyone who can be recycled after the run certainly will be. The simulations are expensive enough as it is." The Baron smiles at me, the smile of the older, the wiser, to the young and naive. "What's amazing is the variation you get each time, even with identical parts. Of course, that's where the drama comes in."

Before, when I saw *Romeo and Juliet,* Friar Lawrence was killed on the second night, falling down a flight of stairs. That's mainly why I went. I was excited by the possibilities opened by the absence of the Friar. Yet the plot was surprisingly unchanged.

It makes me think of Hwang-li and I say to the Baron, "Did you know it was a historian who created the simulations?"

"I don't have your knowledge of history," he answers. "Svanneshal tells me you are quite gifted. And you have a specialty . . . forgive me. I know Svanneshal has told me."

"Mass movements. They don't lend themselves to simulation." The Duchess has not heard of Hwang-li either, but then only a historian

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would have. It was so many revolutions ago. I could argue that the historians are the true revolutionary heroes, retaining these threads of our past, bringing them through the upheaval. Many historians have died to protect the record. And *their* names are lost to us forever. I am glad for a chance to talk about Hwang-li.

"Hwang-li was not thinking of entertainment, of course. He was pondering the inevitability of history. Is the course of history directed by personalities or by circumstances?" I ask the Baron. "What do you think?"

The Baron regards me politely. "In the real world," he says, "personalities and circumstances are inseparable. The one creates the other and vice versa. Only in simulation can they be disjoined."

"It follows then," I tell him, "that if you could intervene to change one, you would simultaneously change both and, therefore, the course of history. Could you make a meaningful change? How much can depend upon a single individual taking a single action at a single moment? Or not taking it?"

"Depending on the individual, the action, and the moment," the Duchess says firmly, "everything could change."

I nod to her. "That is what Hwang-li believed. He wished to test it by choosing an isolated case, a critical moment in which a series of seeming accidents resulted in a devastating war. He selected the Mancini murder, which was manageable and well-documented. There were seven personality profiles done on Philip Mancini at the time and Hwang-li had them all."

The Baron has forgotten Juliet's nurse entirely and turns to me with gratifying attention. "But this is fascinating," he says. "Svanneshal, you must hear this." Svanneshal moves in closer to him; the cyber seems relieved to have both standing together.

"Go on," says the Baron.

"I was telling your father about Hwang-li."

"Oh, I know this story already." Svanneshal smiles at the Baron coquettishly. "It's the murder that interests him," she says to me. "Aberrant personalities are sort of a hobby of his."

The Baron tells me what he already knows of the murder, that Frank Mancini was killed by his brother Philip.

"Yes, that's right," I say encouragingly. This information survives in a saying we have—enmity is sometimes described as "the love of the Mancinis."

It is the Duchess who remembers the saying. But beyond that, she says she knows nothing of the case. I direct my statements to her. "Frank Mancini was a security guard, back in the days when humans functioned in that capacity. He was responsible for security in the Irish sector. He had just learned of the terrorist plot against Pope Peter. The Pope was

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scheduled to speak in an open courtyard at noon; he was to be shot from the window of a nearby library. Frank was literally reaching for the phone at the moment Philip Mancini burst into his study and shot him four times for personal reasons."

Svanneshal is bored with the discussion. Although she is extremely intelligent, it is not yet something she values. But she will. I look at her with the sudden realization that it is the only bit of inherited wealth she can be certain of holding on to. She is playing with her father's hair, but he catches her hand. "Go on," he says to me.

"Philip had always hated his brother. The murder was finally triggered by a letter Philip received from their mother—a letter we know he wrongly interpreted. What if he had read the letter more carefully? What if it had arrived ten minutes later? Hwang-li planned to replay the scene, running it through a number of such minute variations. Of course he had no simulants, nor did he need them. It was all to be done by computer."

"The whole project seems to me to raise more questions than it answers." Svanneshal is frowning. "What if the Pope had survived? How do you assess the impact of that? You cannot say there would have been no revolution. The Pope's death was a catalyst, but not a cause."

I am pleased to see that she not only knows the outline of the incident, but has obviously been giving it some thought. I begin to gesture emphatically with my hands as though we were in class, but I force myself to stop. This is, after all, a social occasion. "So, war is not averted, but merely delayed?" I ask her. "Another variation. Who would have gained from such a delay? What else might have been different if the same war was fought at a later time? Naturally nothing can be proved absolutely—that is the nature of the field. But it is suggestive. When we can answer these questions we will be that much closer to the day when we direct history along the course we choose."

"We already do that," the Duchess informs me quietly. "We do that every day of our lives." Her right hand smooths the glove over her left hand. She interlaces the fingers of the two.

"What happened in the experiment?" the Baron asks.

"Hwang-li never finished it. He spent his life perfecting the Mancini programs and died in a fire before he had finished. Another accident. Then there were the university purges. There's never been that kind of money for history again." I look into Svanneshal's eyes, deep within her hood. "It's too bad, because I've an experiment of my own I've wanted to do. I wanted to simulate Antony and Cleopatra, but make her nose an inch longer."

This is an old joke, but they do not respond to it. The Baron says

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politely that it would provide an interesting twist the next time *Antony and Cleopatra* is done. He'll bring it up with the Arts Committee.

Svanneshal says, "You see, Daddy, you owe Hwang-li everything. He did the first work in synthetic personalities."

It occurs to me that the Baron may think Svanneshal and I are trying to persuade him to fund me and I am embarrassed. I search for something to say to correct this impression, but we are interrupted by a commotion onstage.

Lady Capulet has torn her dress at the collar, her hair is wild and uncombed. Under her tears, her face is ancient, like a tragic mask. She screams at her husband that it is his fault their baby is dead. If he hadn't been so cold, so unyielding . . .

He stands before her, stooped and silent. When at last she collapses, he holds her, stroking the hair into place about her sobbing face. There is soft applause for this gentleness. It was unexpected.

"Isn't it wonderful?" Svanneshal's face glows with appreciation. "Garriss again," she informs me although I know Garriss did the programming for the entire Capulet family. It is customary to have one writer for each family so that the similarities in the programming can mirror the similarities of real families created by genetics and upbringing.

The simulants are oblivious to this approval. Jaques tells us, every time, that the world is a stage, but here the stage is a world, complete in itself, with history and family, with even those random stagehands, death and disease. This is what the simulants live. If they were told that Juliet is no one's daughter, that everything they think and say is software, could they believe it? Would it be any less tragic?

Next to me I hear the beginning of a scream. It is choked off as suddenly as it started. Turning, I see the white figure of the Duchess slumping to the ground, a red stain spreading over her bodice. The gloved hand is pressed against her breast; red touches her fingers and moves down her arm. Her open eyes see nothing. Beside her, the cyber is returning a bloody blade to the case on its belt.

It was all so fast. "It killed her," I say, barely able to comprehend the words. "She's dead!" I kneel next to the Duchess, not merely out of compassion, but because my legs have given way. I look up at the Baron, expecting to see my own horror reflected in his face, but it is not.

He is calmly quiet. "She came at me," he says. "She moved against me. She meant to kill me."

"No!" I am astounded. Nothing is making sense to me. "Why would she do that?"

He reaches down and strips the wet glove from the warm hand. There is her lifeline—IPS3552. "Look at this," he says, to me, to the small group

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of theater-goers who have gathered around us. "She was not even human."

I look at Svanneshal for help. "You knew her. She was no cyber. There is another explanation for the brand. She told me. . . ." I do not finish my sentence, suddenly aware of the implausibility of the Duchess' story. But what other explanation is there? Svanneshal will not meet my eyes. I find something else to say. "Anyway, the cybers have never been a threat to us. They are not programmed for assassination." It is another thought I do not finish, my eyes distracted by the uniform of the House of Himmlich. I get to my feet slowly, keeping my hands always visible and every move I make is watched by the Baron's irrational cyber. "The autopsy will confirm she is human," I say finally. "Was human."

Svanneshal reaches for my arm below the shoulder, just where the Duchess held me. She speaks into my ear, so low that I am the only one who hears her. Her tone is ice. "The cybers are all that stand between us and the mob. You remember that!"

Unless I act quickly, there will be no autopsy. Already maintenance duplicates are scooping up the body in the manner reserved for the disposal of cybers. Three of them are pulling the combs from her hair, the jewels from her ears and neck and depositing them in small, plastic bags. The Baron is regarding me, one hand wiping his upper lip. Sweat? No, the Baron feels nothing, shows no sign of unease.

Svanneshal speaks to me again. This time her voice is clearly audible. "It tried to kill my father," she says. "You weren't watching. I was."

It would be simpler to believe her. I try. I imagine that the whole time we were talking about the Mancinis, the Duchess was planning to murder her host. For political reasons? For personal reasons? I remember the conversation, trying to refocus my attention to her, looking for the significant gesture, the words which, listened to later, will mean so much more. But, no. If she had wanted to kill the Baron, surely she would have done it earlier, when the Baron returned to us without his cyber.

I return Svanneshal's gaze. "Did anyone else see that?" I ask, raising my voice. I look from person to person. "Did anyone see anything?"

No one responds. Everyone is waiting to see what I will do. I am acutely conscious of the many different actions I can take; they radiate out from me as if I stood at the center of a star, different paths, all ultimately uncontrollable. Along one path I have publicly accused the Baron of murder through misjudgment. His programs are opened for examination; his cybers are recalled. He is ruined. And, since he has produced the bulk of the city's security units, Svanneshal is quite right. We are left unprotected before the mob. Could I cause that?

I imagine another, more likely path. I am pitted alone against the money and power of the Himmlichs. In this vision the Baron has become

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a warlord with a large and loyal army. He is untouchable. Wherever I try to go, his cybers are hunting me.

The body has been removed, a large, awkward bundle in the arms of the maintenance duplicates. The blood is lifting from the tile, like a tape played backwards, like a thing which never happened. The paths radiating out from me begin to dim and disappear. The moment is past. I can do nothing now.

In the silence that has fallen around us, we suddenly hear that Romeo is coming. Too early, too early. What will it mean? The knot of spectators around us melts away; everyone is hurrying to the tombs. Svanneshal takes my arm and I allow myself to be pulled along. Her color is high and excited, perhaps from exertion, perhaps in anticipation of death. When we reach the tombs we press in amongst the rest.

On one side of me, Svanneshal continues to grip my arm. On the other is a magnificent woman imposingly tall, dressed in Grecian white. Around her bare arm is a coiled snake, fashioned of gold, its scales in the many muted colors gold can wear. A fold of her dress falls for a moment on my own leg, white, like the gown of the Grand Duchess de Vie and I find myself crying. "Don't do it," I call to Romeo. "It's a trick! It's a trap. For God's sake, look at her." The words come without volition, part of me standing aside, marveling, pointing out that I must be mad. He can't hear me. He is incapable of hearing me. Only the audience turns to look, then turns away politely, hushed to hear Romeo's weeping. He is so young, his heart and hands so strong, and he says his lines as though he believed them, as though he made them up.

The Baron leans into Svanneshal. "Your friend has been very upset by the incidents of the evening." His voice is kind. "As have we all. And she is cold. Give her my cape."

I am not cold, though I realize with surprise that I am shaking. Svanneshal wraps the red cape about me. "You must come home with us tonight," she says. "You need company and care." She puts an arm about me and whispers, "Don't let it upset you so. The simulants don't feel anything."

Then her breath catches in her throat. Romeo is drinking his poison. I won't watch the rest. I turn my head aside and in the blurred lens of my tears, one image wavers, then comes clear. It is the snake's face, quite close to me, complacency in its heavy-lidded eyes. "Don't look at me like that," I say to a species which vanished centuries ago. "Who are you to laugh?"

I think that I will never know the truth. The Duchess might have been playing with the cyber again. Her death might have been a miscalculation. Or the Baron might have planned it, have arranged the whole evening around it. I would like to know. I think of something Hwang-li

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is supposed to have said. "Never confuse the record with the truth. It will always last longer." I am ashamed that I did nothing for the Duchess, accuse myself of cowardice, tears dropping from my cheeks onto the smooth flesh of my palms. In the historical record, I tell myself, I will list her death as a political assassination. And it will be remembered that way.

Next to me Svanneshal stiffens and I know Juliet has lifted the knife. This is truly the end for her; the stab wounds will prevent her re-use and her voice is painfully sweet, like a song.

One moment of hesitation, but that moment is itself a complete world. It lives onstage with the simulants, it lives with the mob in their brief and bitter lives, it lives where the wealthy drape themselves in jewels. If I wished to find any of them, I could look in that moment. "But how," I ask the snake, "would I know which was which?" ●

MARTIN GARDNER (from page 109)

THIRD SOLUTION TO RELATIVISTICALLY SPEAKING

To determine the sum of the first n powers of 2, just go to the next power and subtract 1. For example, the sum of the first ten powers of 2 is $2^{11} - 1 = 2.047$. Numbers of the form $2^n - 1$ are called Mersenne numbers. If they are prime (have no divisors except themselves and 1) they are called Mersenne primes. No one knows if the number of such primes is infinite or finite. Only 29 Mersenne primes are known. The 29th and largest, $2^{132049} - 1$, is a number of 39,751 digits. This is the largest known prime. David Slowinski discovered it in 1983 using a Cray computer.

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FROM THE LAKE

by Pete Hamill

Pete Hamill, the well-known newspaper columnist, has written screenplays and novels, as well as hundreds of articles and essays. The most recent collection of his work, *Invisible City*, was published in 1980.

art: Arthur George

The warm summer rain fell through the night, and when Jimmy Gárcia left for the park in the morning, carrying his pole, his pail, and his jar of earthworms, it was still dark and fog was clinging to the earth. He went to his daily spot, the lucky place under the maple tree, where the

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catfish came in great clusters to feed beside the low stone retaining wall that edged the huge lake. He loved the park when it was like this, gray and empty. The city was a million miles away, and the fog obscured the far side of the lake, and to this ten-year-old, it was like being present at the beginning of the world.

So he sat there, the rain dripping on the maple tree, his line cast into the gray water, and he thought about the Mets, wondering what it would be like to go fishing with Keith Hernandez, and he thought about a girl named Janet who lived on 11th Street, and he thought about the beautiful woman with the blond hair who taught geography at Holy Virgin School. And then he noticed the water slapping at the stone wall of the lake shore.

What was this? There were no tides here. There was no wind, just a frail steady rain dripping softly through the fog. There was no reason for the waters of the lake to slap against the wall. But Jimmy Garcia felt a great stirring out in the fog, the water's agitation, and then the silence of the birds. It was as if all the birds of the great park had chosen at once to hold their songs and their whistles, their greetings and warnings.

And then he heard the sound of great engines, groaning with the lifting of massive weight, and then water being heaved, shoved, pushed aside. The birds exploded in alarm and flight, and there was a sound of the beating of many wings, and waves washed over the edge of the retaining wall, and Garcia's line was pulled drastically to the right. Something had come to the surface from the bottom of the lake. Something huge, immense, something dark and monstrous. It loomed out there beyond the fog, and Jimmy Garcia was afraid. He said three quick Hail Marys. He pulled in his line. He hid behind the trunk of the giant maple and heard the engines stop, and then he waited in the silence. A breeze riffled the leaves of the tree, dropping water on the boy, and then there were holes in the fog, and he could see it: long and low and black, its surface crusted with barnacles, ribbons of seaweed hanging from its guns.

It was a submarine.

He saw the letters on the conning tower: U-14. He saw the dark wet deck, some of its handlines hanging limply. The submarine did not move; it sat there, lost and alone.

Jimmy Garcia picked up his jar of bait, his pot and his line, and started to run. He ran through the great park, and down the streets leading to the avenue, his legs churning, his heart pumping, and he kept running until he reached the house of Lefty Marquez. Lefty would know what to do. Lefty was twelve, the smartest boy on the block, the greatest stickball player, the possessor of the most beautiful girlfriend, the astonishing

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Gabriela. Garcia pounded on Lefty's door, until his older friend appeared, bleary-eyed in his shorts.

"Get dressed, man!" Jimmy Garcia said. "There's a submarine in the lake!"

"What?"

"Hurry!"

They trotted through the rain-emptied streets and into the foggy park. Lefty protested all the way. This was foolish, crazy; how could a submarine get into a lake? Jimmy Garcia insisted; he had seen it. But when they reached the lake, his heart collapsed. The fog was lifting; they could see to the far shore; the submarine was gone.

"Come on," Lefty Marquez said. "Let's go home."

All day, Jimmy Garcia feared the scorn of Lefty Marquez. He could laugh at him; could tell the others that poor Jimmy Garcia must have gone a little loco, he was seeing submarines in the lake. But Lefty went off somewhere with the astonishing Gabriela; he said nothing. Jimmy got through the day, and in the morning, he went again to the lake.

On this morning, there was no fog, but the park was empty in the hour before dawn. And then it happened again. The water stirred, the engines groaned and coughed, the birds scrambled for safety, and the U-14 rose to the surface. When its engines stopped, the submarine just sat there, idle, quiet, drifting almost serenely on the surface of the lake. This time Jimmy Garcia did not run to find Lefty. He couldn't risk that two days in a row; the neighborhood would begin looking at him strangely, mothers would warn their children not to play with him. No. He would sit here and look at those encrusted hatches, the hanging lines, the faded letters saying U-14. Someone would open a hatch. He would call to them. He would tell them to come on shore, to forget the war, whatever war it was, tell them all the wars were over. He would take them from the submarine down to his grandmother's house and she would let them take a hot bath and have some scrambled eggs or rice and beans, some sweet coffee, some seeded rolls.

But then the sun began to rise, the sky warming, the birds resuming their morning concert. And then the engines started, and the submarine settled below the surface and was gone.

The next day, Jimmy Garcia took his cousin Frankie's Instamatic to the lake. But the submarine did not appear. He asked Lefty Marquez that afternoon if he wanted to go fishing in the morning, but Lefty laughed and said, "No, man, I'm afraid of submarines, and besides, I got more important things to do." He walked away with the astonishing Gabriela, leaving Jimmy Garcia to his visions of mornings. Jimmy went to the library and looked at picture books from the Second World War,

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saw photographs of German U-boats, their bearded commanders, their victims; he read about wolf packs and convoys. And he imagined these men, under the water for 40 years, growing old, their beards to the ground, traveling the oceans day after day, month after month. He wanted to meet them, speak to them, hear about their lives.

But the next day, Jimmy Garcia didn't see the submarine, nor did he see it the day after that. On the third day, he caught two fish; he dozed; he thought about the Mets and the girl named Janet from 11th Street. But every succeeding morning became a disappointment, no matter how many fish he caught, no matter how the Mets did. He had seen his submarine, and now he was afraid that he would never see it again, and he began to believe that his world could never again be complete.

Two weeks later, he was again in the park on a morning that glistened with rain. The great maple tree was like an umbrella, and he felt warm in spite of the rain. Then he heard someone calling his name. He turned to see Lefty Marquez coming through the rain, holding the hand of the astonishing Gabriela. They were soaked; Lefty's afro had exploded; the black hair of the astonishing Gabriela was plastered to her skull. Her lavender T-shirt was clinging to her cinnamon skin, but Jimmy Garcia couldn't look at her; she made him feel funny.

"I told Gabriela 'bout your submarine, man," Lefty said, turning to wink at the girl. "Figured we'd wait and see it."

Jimmy Garcia felt foolish, he shrugged, he made room for them under the maple tree. The rain fell steadily; fog blurred the edges of the lake. Lefty smoked a cigarette, his arm draped around Gabriela.

And then the stirring began, water slapped the stone retaining wall; the birds went silent, and through the milky fog, huge, barnacled, looking lost and, to Jimmy Garcia, unbearably lonely, the submarine rose to the surface of the lake.

"Ay, Dios mio," Gabriela whispered, standing now, her eyes fearful. Lefty dropped his cigarette. The submarine turned, its prow like a giant nose sniffing the shore. They were looking at the black hole of its cannon. Lefty put his arm around the astonishing Gabriela, and then Jimmy Garcia stepped into the lake. "Hey!" he shouted. "Hey, in there, come on, man—open up!" The water was at his waist, and then he began to swim. Suddenly the morning was split by the sound of the engine. The submarine backed away, and there was a honking sound of mortal distress, and a great churning of the water, and the submarine vanished.

The astonishing Gabriela shivered, and Lefty said to Jimmy Garcia, "Don't ever say anything about this to *nobody*, man. You got it?" Jimmy Garcia said he wouldn't tell anyone about the submarine, but it didn't matter. He knew he would never see the submarine again, and, of course, he was right. ●

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Phyllis Eisenstein has been writing professionally since 1971, both on her own and in collaboration with her husband Alex. She has published four novels, *Shadow of Earth*, *Born to Exile*, *Sorcerer's Son*, and *In the Hands of Glory*, as well as some twenty shorter pieces. Her most recent major project is *The Crystal Palace*, a sequel to Sorcerer's Son.

by Phyllis Eisenstein

SENSE OF DUTY

art: Daniel Horne

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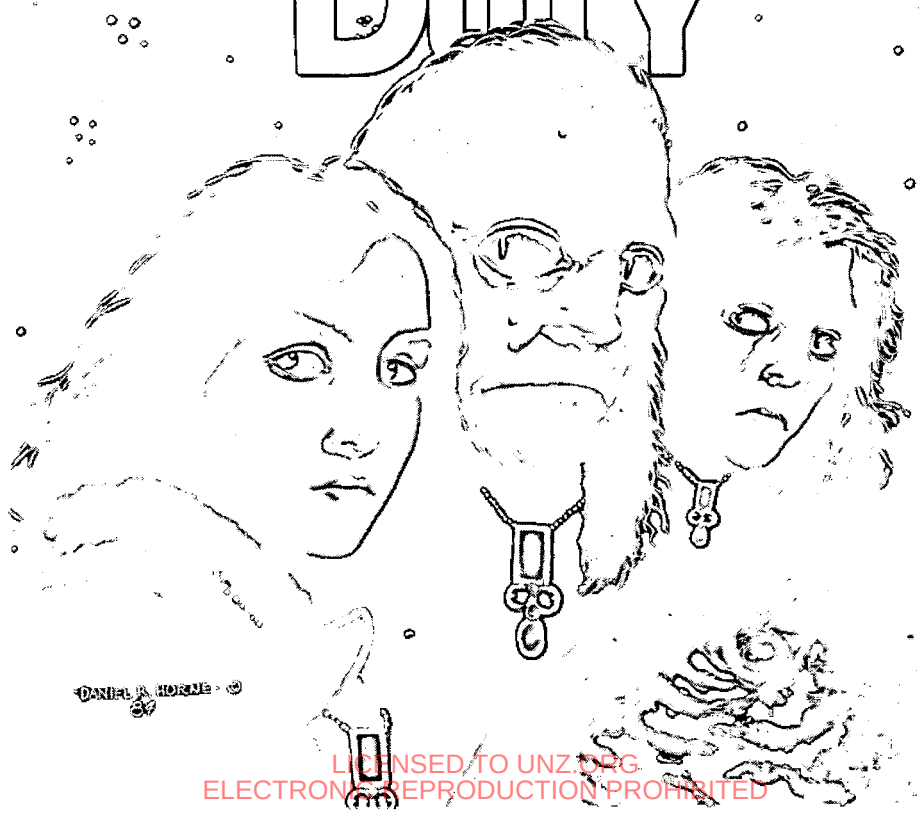

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How shall I start this story, my sweet Mariana, knowing that you won't read it for such a very long time? You were sitting on my lap only an hour ago, playing pattycake, your chubby hands so small against my own, and it was hard for me to imagine you as an adult looking at your mother's words on a yellowing sheet of paper. Will you even remember me by then—my face, my voice, the way I rocked you to sleep? Will you have dreamt of me sometimes, and wondered how it would have been to grow up under my care? Or will you just hate me for what I did to you, as I once hated my own mother? Oh, I hope that won't be so, Mariana. I hope that by the time you read these words you will already have come to understand that there are no good choices in our lives, dear child, only bad ones and less bad.

My own life, I'm sure, would seem very strange to you. It was strange even to my parents, though I never suspected that while I was growing up. I myself had nothing else to compare it with, and so I thought that the place I lived was quite ordinary and that I and my parents were very much like the people around us. I thought that, even after looking through my father's glasses.

I was very young at the time, curious about everything, and the glasses were a temptation too strong to resist. The hearing aids were out of reach—my parents wore them constantly, and so there was no way I could try one in my own ear. But my father hardly ever wore his glasses, though he always kept them near him, in his breast pocket by day, on his bedside table at night. More than once, I had been told not to touch them, especially when he lifted me into his arms for a hug and they were so close to my hand that I couldn't resist the smooth, almost silky texture of their soft leather case. I had been told they were too fragile for my child's touch, and I understood that, having broken a fair number of my mother's porcelain miniatures. Still, I had no glasses of my own, and I couldn't help wondering how they would look on my face.

My chance came the morning after a heavy rainstorm. My parents' bedroom window had been left open during the night, and a small rug had been soaked and required immediate removal to the basement. As they rushed the dripping, unwieldy bundle downstairs, I noticed that, in his hurry, my father had left the glasses behind. I slipped into the room and carefully took them from their case. They were heavier than I had expected, and the hinges stiffer, but I managed to unfold them and set them on my nose. They were, of course, much too large for me, their stems projecting well behind my ears, and I had to hold them on with both hands.

I was young enough not to know that some eyes were less perfect than my own, and so I did not think it odd that the lenses let me see without any distortion. I turned to the mirror to look at myself, and I couldn't

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help smiling because the sight was so silly, like a caricature of an adult. And then I happened to notice the reflection of the bedroom window. I had looked out my own window some moments earlier, at the backyard, the grass all sparkling with water droplets, and at the sky, swept clean of every cloud. But the square of sky reflected in the mirror was different—still blue, but overlaid with brilliant bands of yellow, orange, and magenta, like strokes from some enormous paintbrush. I turned to look at the window itself, and it was the same. But oh, when I reached the sill and saw more than that tiny square . . . to my child eyes the sight was gorgeous, curving stripes spanning from horizon to horizon, converging in clusters here and there, broad wedges of blue between them. I stared and stared until I heard my parents' voices, and then I barely had enough time to slip the glasses back into their case on the bedside table.

The lines in the sky vanished, of course, when I took them off.

I didn't tell my parents what I had done, what I had seen. I was afraid of punishment. And I was also afraid that, for some reason I could not fathom, I was not supposed to see the sky that way, and if I told them I had, something would be spoiled for me. What that something might be, I couldn't guess. But the fact that I had no glasses of my own showed clearly enough that the patterns in the sky were not for me. Still, I thought of them sometimes when I was in bed at night, saw them in my mind, and wondered why so many people I saw on the street were allowed to wear glasses while I was not.

At this point, you'll probably shake your head at my naïveté. I doubt that you can imagine someone who doesn't know about those markings in the sky; they'll have been part of your life for a very long time. But remember, I said my life would be strange to you. Now I must tell you something about that strangeness.

I grew up in a very large city named Chicago. By very large, I mean a population of several million, in a country where such cities were not uncommon. My parents chose to educate me in the local government-supported school system, even though it was not of the highest available quality, because they thought interaction on a broad variety of social and intellectual levels would be good for me. In this, they were mistaken. From the beginning, most of my schoolmates disliked me, and—socially isolated by their dislike—I did very little interacting on any level at all.

At the time, I did not understand why this should be so, and I had a great deal of trouble communicating about the matter to my parents, who seemed to think that, somehow, I simply wasn't trying hard enough to be friendly. Now I realize that my problems were due partly to the other children's resentment of my too-obviously superior intelligence, and partly to their perception, on some deep level, that I was *different.*

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Children, I think, have a particular sensitivity to differenceness, and neither tolerance nor courtesy for those who manifest it. There were a few good moments, a few brief flashes of friendliness from individuals who themselves danced on the social peripheries at school, but on balance my childhood and early adolescence were miserable.

However, though a social failure, I was an intellectual success, completing the standard courses of primary and secondary education so effectively that I was admitted to a university of great prestige. And my life there was refreshingly different; the place was full of people who had nurtured their intellects at the expense of social integration, and who—faced for the first time in their lives with their intellectual equals—were finally beginning to form real friendships. I counted myself one of them. It was a glorious experience to sit through the afternoon talking and laughing and knowing that we were embarking together and willingly on the great journey into the accumulated knowledge of an entire species. That was heady wine for me, that great journey with stalwart friends.

And even headier was the experience of falling in love.

He was my age, a classmate and, by the standards of the time and place, physically attractive. I had never been in love before, and though the entertainment media had displayed the phenomenon to me, they had not prepared me to be so completely overwhelmed by it. If he entered a room, I could not tear my eyes from him; if he smiled, I found myself smiling, too; and if he laughed, I felt a sun burst inside me. We shared two classes, adjoining seats in both, and he appeared to be well pleased by that circumstance. In time, we began to share meals and to take long walks about the campus together. He was a charming companion, and I found myself trying hard to be charming myself, so that he would continue to enjoy my presence.

His name was Edward.

The university was located in Chicago, and therefore I continued to live with my parents during my period of instruction there. I told them, of course, about my feelings for Edward, and I even brought him home for dinner now and again. They seemed to like him personally, but I could sense that they were less than happy about the intensity of my interest in him.

At the time, I believed this was because his socio-economic background did not please them. His father was a dockworker in a large city some distance away, his mother a clerk in clothing shop, and he himself worked in the university bookstore in order to supplement the scholarship that defrayed most of his expenses. In sharp contrast, my expenses were paid by my parents, whose substantial income was derived from a flourishing air-freight company.

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I thought it was social prejudice that caused my parents to introduce me to the son of one of their business associates.

He was a pleasant enough person, a few years older than I, and a partner in his parents' air-freight business. He escorted me to the theater a few times, and bought me several expensive meals.

From the first, I had the impression that he was entertaining me as a favor to his parents. I tried to be friendly, as a favor to my own parents, but our meetings tended to be somewhat strained. We were two people with no real attraction to each other, like two ticket-holders waiting in line at an athletic event, passing the time cordially till the gates should open.

I only felt truly alive with Edward.

We had intellectual closeness. Physical closeness seemed inevitable. I saw all the couples roaming the university campus, holding hands, sometimes even with their arms about each others' waists. I watched them smile into each others' eyes, whisper in each others' ears, kiss. I had never been kissed, except by my parents. I had never touched Edward except by accident, a brushing of shoulders in adjoining chairs, the brief contact of hands in passing a book. Truthfully, I was a little afraid to touch him, as if some kind of electricity would leap between us at the contact, wonderful and terrible all at once.

But the time came. A time I shall never forget.

It was spring, a long twilit evening in spring, and the air itself was as new and fresh as the grass we walked on. Edward and I had both done well on an important series of examinations, and we were feeling exultant. Or, as we phrased it at the time, drunk with happiness.

Drunk with happiness, I caught his hand in mine as we walked. He smiled and closed his fingers firmly about my own. His were warm, I remember. Very warm.

We fell silent then. I was supremely conscious of the pressure of his hand, and my heart was pounding so hard that it seemed to shake me with every beat. At last we stopped under an old, gnarled tree, a tree as old as the university, its bark scarred by the brief messages of lovers who had paused there before us and thought to tell the world about themselves. We stopped, and I leaned my head on Edward's shoulder, on his warm, warm shoulder, and then he put his arms around me and kissed me, and his lips were warm, too, as if the sun had been heating them all day in preparation for this moment.

He drew back, then, and I couldn't see his face in the darkness, but his arm was still around me, and it stayed there as we walked back to the dormitory that was his campus home and the dinner that waited there. Edward's arm around me. I had never been so happy. I was too happy even to notice my parents' frowns later that evening. They wanted

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me to see their business associate's son again, but I just laughed and shook my head. I had no use for him.

The next day, Edward was absent from both of the classes we shared. I thought perhaps he was sick—he had been so very warm the evening before—and I called the dormitory, but he wasn't there. A little later, when I had a free hour, I slipped into the back of one of his other classes and saw him in his usual seat in the front row. My heart started to pound again, only partly with relief. It was so wonderful to see him. How empty my life had been before; Edward made up for all those unhappy years. Edward. Edward.

I waited for him just outside the classroom door. He smiled when he saw me, but slowly; a tired smile, I thought. There were dark circles under his eyes. I asked him if he was all right, but he just shrugged and said he'd promised to work an early hour at the bookstore, so he had to hurry. I said I'd see him later, but he was already loping away, and I didn't know if he had heard me.

I was at the store when his shift was over, and we walked out together. He was very quiet, and he moved slowly; I thought he looked even more tired than before. I suggested he needed some rest, but he didn't answer; he *was* walking toward the dormitory, though. Slowly.

It was when I tried to take his hand that he stopped.

He tried not to look at me. He tried to look past me, as if he were afraid of my face, my eyes. And when he spoke, he stammered and hesitated, and it wasn't his way of speaking at all, it was some stranger standing there in the bright sunlight, some terribly uncomfortable stranger. He apologized for the previous night, for kissing me, for holding me in his arms. He apologized for giving me the impression that he wanted some kind of physical relationship with me. He had thought about it all night, he had tossed and turned and paced his room, thinking about how to tell me that he shouldn't monopolize me any more, that I should see other people and find someone right for me.

I didn't understand at first. I didn't *want* to understand. I told him I didn't want to spend my time with anyone else. I told him I cared for him more than I had ever cared for anyone in my life.

And he said he was sorry but he just couldn't return that feeling.

Abruptly, he started walking again, but not slowly now, not slowly at all. I had to run to catch up, to stay beside him, talking rapidly all the while, asking him to reconsider, not to make such a hasty decision, to give himself more time, to give me more time, and he didn't answer me, he just kept going. Tears were blurring my vision by the time we reached the dormitory steps, and I stumbled and barked my shin on the concrete. He stopped then, his hand on the door, and he was breathing almost as hard as I was. He didn't help me up. He just looked down at me and said

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it would be better if we made a clean break. It would be better. And he went inside.

The next few days were a bitter ordeal for me. Edward attended the classes we shared, but he sat across the room instead of beside me, and not once did he glance in my direction. I knew, because I never looked away from him. I heard the instructor only dimly, and I took no notes at all. The material suddenly seemed unimportant, only Edward's face was important. Not once did that face smile at me. Not once.

I tried to say hello at first, after class, but he always hurried away. Sometimes I followed him, if I had free time, or even if I didn't, just followed him to wherever he was going, class or the bookstore or the dormitory, followed at a distance. I think I was *willing* him to turn around and see me, to wave, to say something, but he never did. Clean break, he had said. Oh, so very clean.

At night, I closed my bedroom door and cried into my pillow. Quietly, so that my parents wouldn't hear.

But they did hear, of course. And they saw my puffy, red-rimmed eyes at the dinner table. And one evening, as I lay on my bed, aching at the emptiness of the universe, I heard them murmuring to each other in the next room, and I knew they were talking about me.

I don't think they ever really understood how I felt about Edward. I don't think they ever dreamed that I could fall in love with one of his kind. That was their mistake, you see. They had chosen to make me what I was without at all comprehending the logical consequences of that choice. And I was the one who had to pay for their misjudgment.

They knocked softly at my bedroom door. I blotted my tears on the pillow and turned it over so the wet part wouldn't show; then I called for them to come in.

They wanted to know what was wrong, of course. I didn't want to tell them at first, but they guessed that it had to do with Edward, and at last the whole story came out, and I was crying again, into my hands this time, my eyes shut tight. I didn't want to see their faces. I didn't want to see the relief I knew must be there. They had disapproved, and now the target of their disapproval had neatly removed himself from their daughter's life. I hated them, at that moment, for perceiving anything positive in my misery.

I felt the bed give as they both sat down on it. Then I felt their hands on my arms. You mustn't feel so sad, they said. There never could have been a future for you and Edward, no more than for you and a dog or a cat. And then they told me the truth, for the very first time, the truth that a child could not have been trusted with, that I had to grow up to hear, and now I was grown up enough. That this place where I had lived all my life was not mine, not my city, not my country, not my planet.

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That these people I had thought were so very much like me were not even my own species. We might look similar on the outside, but inside, our structures and our chemistries were different. My pheromones were wrong, they said, and Edward could not respond to them. No member of his species could.

At first I thought they making some sort of bizarre joke. I was a human being, *homo sapiens sapiens*. I knew that. And yet, when I looked up at them, I saw that their faces were serious, even as their mouths formed one preposterous word after another.

And then I thought, My parents are insane.

We talked through the night, the three of us. I had read about structured delusions in a psychology text, and what they told me in that long, long conversation seemed to fit a diagnosis of schizophrenia perfectly. They were officers in the military establishment of an interstellar civilization, part of a team that had come to this planet to maintain the frontier garrison and refueling station that had been established here generations ago. Their identities were false, carefully prepared by their predecessors, and complete with all the appropriate documents. Though it did produce income, the air freight company was just part of their camouflage, as other commercial transport concerns had been in earlier times. Their real job, the job of their entire thinly-spread species, was to render assistance to travelers from a vast galactic empire totally unknown to *homo sapiens sapiens*. They—and I—actually looked less human than I thought, but sophisticated cosmetic techniques had enhanced a superficial similarity, and so we passed.

They had intended to tell me all of this, they said, when they were sure that I could be trusted to keep the secret. When my local education was done. When it was time for me to join the family business, to receive my own commission and my own assignment.

I listened, thinking to humor them with my attention. How trivial my own problems must have seemed to them, I thought, in the face of this grand delusion. Yet I had to ask, how *could* they believe it all? If we only seemed human on the outside, how had I passed the physical examinations required for entry into school, how had I been able to undergo blood tests, vaccinations, X-rays? Surely my identity would have been exposed at some time. No, they said, for they had doctors of their own to deal with these situations. This was an old garrison, a civilization intensively studied by their own, and they had evolved many ways of evading its threats to their secrecy. Every officer intended for service here was thoroughly briefed before beginning a tour of duty, and so far, in all the time their species had been on this planet, there had never been any insurmountable problems.

But *I* had not been briefed, I said. *I* had no way of knowing that my

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body could give their secret away. What would have happened if I had been hit by a vehicle and carried off, unknown to my parents, to some hospital, to be examined by some human doctor? Where would their secret have been then? And they looked at each other—nervously, I thought, each of them trying to think of some clever rationalization—and my mother said we were a tough species, hard to damage, very hard, but if the damage were great enough to incapacitate, there was an implant beneath my heart that would instantly burn my body to a loose gray ash. It would be a bizarre and inexplicable event, but it would not give the secret away. This planet was not ready to join the galactic empire, said my mother, would not be ready for a very long time, but the garrison was here, and so the secret must be kept.

And when she said that, I thought I had the question that would shatter the delusion, if any question could. Why, I asked, was the garrison here, rather than on Mars or one of the moons of Jupiter or Saturn? Surely a spacefaring civilization knew how to recycle food and water, knew how to refine fuel from the raw materials available on an uninhabited world. Why, if there really were a secret galactic empire, did it choose as a base the one body in this whole solar system where the secret might be in jeopardy? I didn't think she could answer that; I couldn't think of a good answer for it myself. But she just laughed, a soft, rueful laugh, and said that I was quite right about the food and water and fuel, but there were fifteen officers scattered across the surface of this planet, and if they were forced to live in a sealed station on some bleak, airless rock, with no one but each other for company, they would all go mad.

It seemed very neat—I had to admit that. But I thought, of course, they've had years to develop their delusion, years to reinforce each other in it. I no longer felt like crying over my own problem. Theirs was too terrible. And I had lived my whole life with them and never suspected it. They had kept their secret supremely well.

By dawn I think they both realized that, no matter how many times I nodded at their words, I didn't really believe anything they said.

My father was the one to halt our conversation. He stood up. He seemed very tall, standing beside the bed—as tall as he had seemed when I was a small child. I had always accepted his word on the truths of the universe, and now I felt guilty that I could no longer do so. He must have read that feeling on my face, because he said it was right that I should doubt, that I should require proof for any claim, even his. The three of us would go to his office at the airport, he said, and he and my mother would show me that proof.

I looked from one of them to the other, pity and protectiveness overwhelming me, as if I were the parent and they the ailing children. I saw that they needed me desperately. They were reaching out to me by in-

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cluding me in their delusion, and I would be betraying them if I didn't make my best effort to shepherd them to professional help. But if I was to attempt that, they must trust me, and there was obviously only one way to prove myself worthy of their trust.

The trip to the airport was not a long one. I had been to the air freight office a number of times and was familiar with it and with the warehouse and hangars next door. Even so early in the morning, workers were already busy there, checking inventory, receiving cargo from ground vehicles, and loading it into airplanes. One of the planes was almost ready to leave, only waiting for clearance from the airport control center for the first departure of the day. My parents conducted me to that plane; the pilot, who apparently expected us, indicated three seats behind his own. We boarded and strapped ourselves in.

After we were airborne, my father took out his glasses and handed them to me.

I hadn't thought about the pattern in the sky for years, but it was still there, bright and clear, the stripes shining strongly even through scattered clouds. They looked broader from a height, each band crisper than any rainbow, forming a vast latticework, like a dome over the world. We flew level beneath them for a time, the city gradually dropping behind us till even its suburbs had given way to cornfields, and then the plane angled upward once more, almost—I thought to myself—as if heading for one particular nexus in that huge, interlocking design, a place where yellow, orange, and magenta came together in a blur of color. And then, as the sky darkened from the blue of atmosphere to the black of space, the nexus loomed before us, and we passed through it as through a wall of steam. The stars came out, more stars than I had ever seen before.

They took me to the base beneath the lava plain on the far side of this planet's satellite, and I saw the installation there and met the two officers on duty. They all took turns, my father said; none of them cared to stay for long, but it was the place that travelers came to, with all the repair facilities that a spacefaring civilization required, and so someone had to be there.

The planet, of course, was the beacon, its latticework pattern, invisible without those special lenses, and undetectable to any human sense or instrument, were the message and the pointer for anyone passing near this system.

You probably won't comprehend what a shock this revelation was to me. I felt as though I were walking through a dream, even though everything about the experience was crisp and clear and tangible. After we returned to our house in Chicago, I could almost have believed I was waking up, that none of it had ever happened, except that my parents gave me my own glasses and my own hearing aid to remind me of reality.

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The hearing aids were, of course, our contacts with the satellite base. At the moment I first slipped mine into my ear, I became a cadet officer under my parents' tutelage. I had joined the family business.

I took some time, and several trips back to the satellite, to make my adjustment to this new identity. I had to drop out of the university—my life just wasn't large enough for two simultaneous educations. And with that, I left Edward behind, and all the yearnings he had evoked in me. No longer would I see him, even from a distance, no longer would I try to talk to him. And I told myself it *was* better this way. He had no place in my new life. No place at all.

But I couldn't help thinking about him sometimes, about his smile, about his arm around me, about his lips that were only warm, I knew now, because my own were cool. In that kiss, he had sensed everything that was different about me, everything that had been meaningless as long as our relationship was merely intellectual. His body had told him I was unacceptable, and he was confused, ashamed, even angry. It was only logical that he should run away from those feelings, and from me. In my rational moments, I could consider these things with cool detachment and rueful understanding.

In my less rational moments, however, I hated my parents for keeping their secret so long, for keeping their camouflage so complete, for letting me grow up under the delusion that I was a human being among my own kind. They had never thought it could hurt me. And they had never thought I could fall in love with a member of another species. They hadn't considered that love has two components, the physical and the psychological, and that I could succumb to one long before I was tested by the other. I hated them deeply, for giving me a life full of falseness, and for making me vulnerable to Edward.

So there I was, grown, a cadet in another planet's military corps, and I hadn't the faintest idea of who or what I was. I was learning about my parents' past, and it was as alien to me as this narrative will be to you. Which species was really mine, the one that formed my mind or the one that made my body? Neither, I thought. I was floating somewhere in between. I felt bewildered.

I won't say that my bewilderment faded with time. But I did become accustomed to the job my parents had given me. I did learn the history and customs of their—my—species, as a foreigner learns the history and customs of another land. I won't say that I ever internalized them. But I became a functioning member of the garrison, and eventually my commission was relayed to me; not surprisingly, I was assigned to the planet I already knew so well. And of course, I also joined that other business, air freight, which actually occupied most of my time. Not long after I received my first promotion, my parents were rotated back to the home

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planet, their tour of duty finished, administrative posts awaiting them, rewards for effective service. Their departure was camouflaged by an airplane crash, after which I arranged a false double funeral. I don't yet know whether or not I was sorry to see them go.

Shortly after that, I married the man who had been intended to take my mind off Edward. He was, of course, one of us, newly arrived here when I first met him. I didn't love him, but he was pleasant, unattached, and biologically compatible.

And, not very long ago, we decided to have you, Mariana. It seemed like a good decision at the time. We felt that a child would complete our lives and give us focus. I think we both wanted to love something. It was only after you were born and we did love you very, very much that I realized how bad a decision it had been. Now I know that we should have adopted a native child, one who could grow up here, stay here, and be secure in a human identity. Or we should have waited till we were rotated back to the home planet; we wouldn't have been too old to start a family then. Instead, we had chosen to perpetuate my own parents' mistake.

I blame myself for this entirely. Your father couldn't have known how it was for me. Like my own parents, he never thought about the life his child would experience outside the walls of our home, never thought how that life would mark you, shape you, claim you.

By the time you read this, you will probably already be imbued with the sense of duty that made my parents and my husband and all the other members of this garrison come to this planet. The sense of duty that has spread our species among the stars. They go, knowing they'll be far from home and loved ones for a long, long time, knowing that the lives they face will be strange and difficult to adjust to. Still, they go, as they have gone for generations, because someone *must* go. I don't profess to understand this. It's something I grew up without, something my parents accepted so completely that they couldn't conceive I might not share it. And yet I do have my own sense of duty. Toward you.

You will go home tomorrow, to grow up among your own kind, where the secret is common knowledge and everyone has seen the stripes in the sky. And the pheromones are appropriate. You will have your chance for happiness. I don't know if we shall ever meet again. I don't know if, when my tour here is over, I will have the courage to return to the planet where my parents were born, to the place where, in spite of the physical traits I share with the rest of the population, I would always be a stranger. Even to you, my child, my flesh and blood, my dear, sweet Mariana. Even to you, the only person in the universe that I love. Even to you. I have made sure of that.

And there, I think, is the worst aspect of this least bad of all the choices in my life. ●

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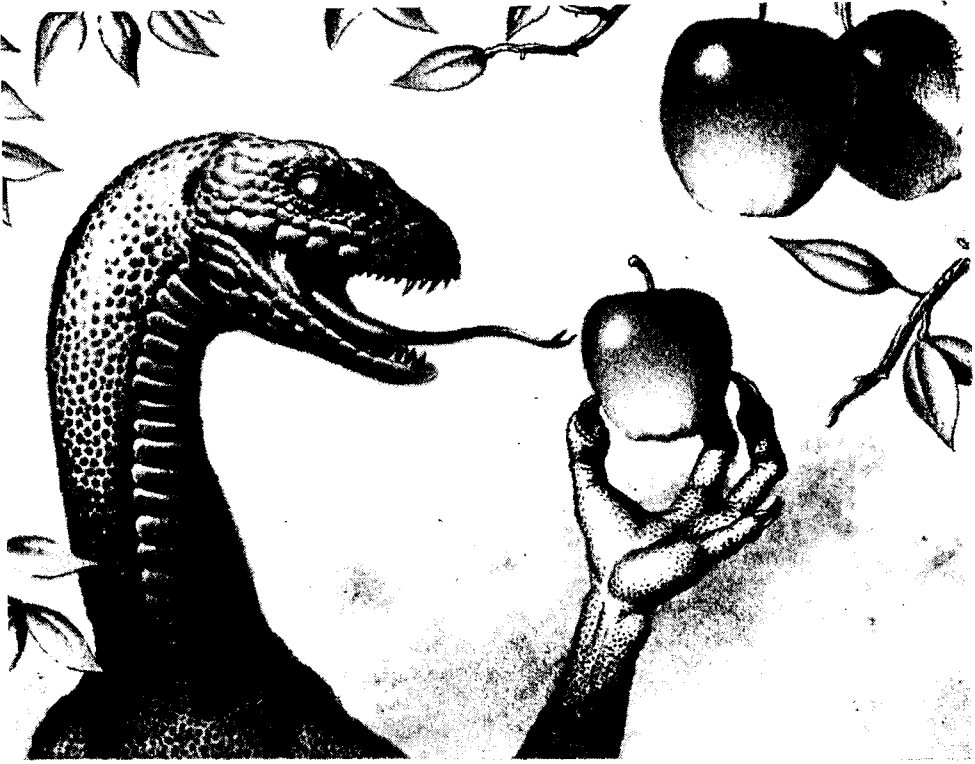

THE LOST GARDEN OF ENID BLYTON, BEATRIX POTTER, LUCY ATWELL AND THE REST OF THE LADS OF THE 32nd PARACHUTE REGIMENT

by Garry Kilworth

The road to Hell is paved with good intentions . . .

art: Robert Walters

The time traveler tightened the last bolt on his machine, wiped his hands on an oily rag, and the climbed into the driver's seat to test the vehicle. He went forward into tomorrow, backward into yesterday, made a few small adjustments, and decided he was ready for the great journey. The time traveler, whose name was Offa Smith, was not so much inter-

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ested in historical sightseeing as becoming immortal and it was for precisely *this* reason he had built his machine. The fact that he could witness past and future events was nice, but purely coincidental and only of peripheral interest.

Offa was going a long way back and before he mounted his machine for the actual journey he stripped completely. Where he was going, or rather *when*, clothes were unnecessary and in fact would be considered rather foppish. There would be few people around to shock in any case. Just the Adamses, hopefully before the arrival of the two children. He didn't even need to take any provisions, because it would all be there, waiting for him, on his arrival. He was not expected of course, but he imagined Adam and Eve would not be inhospitable to the casual visitor, since they'd not had a single caller from the first day of their marriage. It was more likely they would welcome him with open arms. They would surely be a little tired of each other's company, even if they were made for each other (or was it *from* each other?).

Offa's ride was smooth and uneventful. As he suspected, his arrival in the Garden of Eden caused a little bit of a stir. Adam came out to meet him not long after the machine had ceased to vibrate. Eve was close behind. The serpent stayed in the shade, its long legs curled underneath it, watching the scene with a frown of disapproval. Good, thought Offa, I'm in time.

"That's a nice thingy you've got there," said Adam, nodding.

"What?" cried Offa. "Oh, the machine. It's called a machine. A time machine in fact."

"Well, it's certainly very nice. All shiny and polished. Don't you think so, darling?"

"Lovely," murmured Eve. "Could I have a ride on it sometime?"

"Most certainly, Miss . . . Mrs. . . . can I call you Eve?"

"Why not," she gave a tinkling laugh. "Everyone else does. We're not at all formal, are we, Addy?"

Offa said, "My name's Offa. I'm from the future. I've come to tell you not to eat the apple." In the shade of the trees the serpent's frown deepened. Offa took something out of the saddle bag and carried it loosely in his hand, having no other place to keep it.

"Well, we weren't planning to actually," said Adam. "In fact, we've been told not to. It was one of His only stipulations when we took up residence. Anything *but* the apples. It's in the lease."

Offa nodded. "Yes, I'm aware of all that, being from the future; however you will be tempted by someone not a thousand miles from here but watch my eyes." The snake gave a sound like "Humph," and pretended to look in the opposite direction.

"Really?" replied Adam. "Well, it was nice of you to come on your shiny

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machine to warn us. While you're here, why don't you stay for the night? Have a look around. It's quite an interesting little place, plenty of long walks."

"I'll show you around if you like," smiled Eve, with a recognizable light in her eyes.

"Very kind of you but that would ruin the whole purpose of the visit, if you know what I mean. You see, if we're very careful, we can get rid of death for the whole human race . . ."

"But we *are* the whole human race," pouted Eve, "and we don't have any nasty things like that here in the first place. Oh, please, *let* me."

Offa was almost swayed from his purpose. She was, after all, an extremely attractive woman and it did not seem as if Adam was the most understanding of husbands. One could see at a glance that while the marriage was stable in most respects, there was one area that had not yet been explored at all. However, marriage guidance counselors and social workers would have to wait their time.

"I'm sorry. The offer is most tempting but I really would rather see the place by myself. Thanks anyway."

Waving them both goodbye he went for a stroll in The Garden and admired the radishes and the size of the marrows. It *was* a very nice place. Dreamy, with fruit dripping from the branches and insects humming like little electric jewels, none of them bothersome.

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING HERE?"

Offa almost jumped out of his skin, then realised who it was.

"Somehow . . . ahem, somehow I just didn't expect that sort of language from the God of the Hebrews," he said.

"GOD OF THE WHAT?"

"Ah, yes, sorry. They're not here yet, are they. Puts me in an awkward position really. Sort of cocky pupil. What I meant was, I didn't expect you to use words like Hell."

"WHY NOT? IT'S ONLY A SCRUFFY LITTLE NIGHT CLUB, SET UP BY ONE OF MY FALLEN ANGELS. THE ONLY ONE . . . YOU COULD SAY I'D HAVE A HUNDRED PERCENT SUCCESS RATE IF IT WASN'T FOR THAT DROPOUT. ANYWAY, YOU HAVEN'T ANSWERED MY QUESTION."

"Ah, yes, well, I'm on a mission of mercy, really. I've come to save Adam and Eve from . . . themselves. You see, I have inside information that they're about to eat some apples and I understand that's not on."

"THE CONTRACT SAYS ANYTHING *BUT* THE APPLES."

"That's my interpretation too, for what it's worth. Anyway, that's why I'm here. Sort of a fairy godmother if you like."

"DON'T OVERSTAY YOUR WELCOME, MOTHER."

"No sir, I certainly will not."

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Offa proceeded further in The Garden and eventually came across the apple tree. Curled at the base was the serpent, cleaning its nails with a twig. Snakey eyes looked Offa up and down.

"Well?" said the serpent.

"Well," replied Offa.

"So what's the black thingy in your right hand? Seems like it might be important since you've not put it down for a second all the time you've been here."

Offa casually inspected the object he was carrying.

"This? This is a Smith and Wesson .45 automatic with a clip of twenty-seven rounds, a double cocking action to stop you from blowing off your own foot and filed sights for a quick, clean draw. It'll blow a hole the size of a soup plate in an elephant's rump."

"We don't have those around yet," said the serpent, "but I've got a good idea what it's for. So what's the deal—the one that doesn't involve the use of that thing?"

Offa said, "You were about to offer Eve one of the apples offa that tree. . . ."

"Cut out the puns. I haven't had breakfast yet."

"Sorry. Well, I suggest you don't . . . tempt Eve, that is."

"What do I get out of it?"

"Let's put it this way—if you do persuade the lady to take a bite, you lose your legs."

"You gonna shoot 'em off, or what?"

"No, the one who owns the orchard will be handing out the rewards and punishments. Apparently you get condemned to leglessness and everyone, you included, gets banished from The Garden, eventually to die. . . . Along with spiders you, the *snake*, become one of the most despised and loathed creatures on the face of the earth."

"What did the spiders go and do?"

Offa paused. "You got me there. Damned if I know. Anyway, if you *don't* give her the apple then we all get to live forever, here, in this beautiful place. And of course you get to keep your legs."

"I didn't really like the way you said *snake* a few minutes back but let me tell you something, Offa—you look like a man who speaks the truth, so I'm not going to spend all day arguing with you. Trust me. The apples will stay where they are. Who wants to go sliding around on their belly forever? And *death*, you said? I don't like the sound of that, either. I don't need that kind of stuff. Consider the world safe from sin."

Offa shook hands with the serpent. "I knew you'd see it my way," he said. With that he marched back to the time machine and climbed aboard.

"Sorry I can't stop," he called to Adam and Eve. "You know how it is. Busy, busy. Have a good time."

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He pressed the switch and was on his way back to the twentieth century.

Now Offa was not a fool and realised that, with no death around, with immortality in the air, so to speak, the world was soon going to become overpopulated, so he had made up his mind to stop every so often to check out the numbers situation. There would be plenty of food, drink and sunshine around of course, because The Garden would still be there. It was a question of whether there would be space on the grass to lie down for a snooze or whatever.

He stopped in 52 B.C. The place was deserted, all except for A. and E., who waved to him from the trees. Funny. *Very* funny. He tried again, this time about A.D. 400. No change. Tenth century. Zilch. By now he had got the drift. No apple, no original sin. No *kids*. If and when he got back to his own time, Offa Smith would disappear quicker than vapor on a hot summer's day. He wouldn't exist. He was only safe while he stayed back and kept from closing the time circle. The only trouble was, he didn't want to stay back. He was an extrovert, was Offa, and those kind of people need people. He had to have an audience. Lots of men slapping him on the back and saying, "Get that Offa, he's a great guy. Knows how to put a joke together." Lots of women to lead astray with his knowledge of fine art and battles in Vietnam. Two people were no good for that sort of thing. They'd be bored within the week—and he had eternity to get through. Extroverts go through people like people go through peanuts at the bar. They need the flow of humanity. The never-ending line of Chinese marching single-file past the flagpole.

Offa went back again, to The Beginning. He realised it was no use. The whole thing was off. Eve would have to have the apple. Adam too. Offa would figure out another way to find immortality. If there was *one*, there must be more.

The serpent refused to have anything to do with it.

"I've gone straight, counsellor," was his answer.

Offa found Eve.

"Where are all the people?" he complained. "You two are supposed to be working like a Ford production line. You're the model T, for Christ's sake."

"For whose sake?"

"Oh, never mind. Just eat one of the apples," he said, wearily.

"I'd rather have an orange. I don't like apples."

"How do you know if you've never tried them?"

"Have you ever eaten fried lizards' intestines?"

"No . . . okay, I get the idea. But look, apples are *sweet*. The landlord, well, the reason he doesn't want you to touch them is because he wants

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them for himself. He's greedy. He knows that once you've tried them you'll want them with every piece of roast pork you eat."

"Look, fella," she replied, putting her hands on her hips, "I just don't like the things. I don't like cabbage, swede, marrow, parsnips and goddam apples, so just take your suggestions to some other quarter."

Just at that moment the serpent came strolling round the rose beds munching an . . . an apple?

"Thought I'd give it a try," he said with his mouth full. "What the hell. You only live once."

"You do now," said Offa, climbing onto his machine once more. "What a mess this has turned out to be. I'm getting out of here."

Just then there was all kinds of fuss. Lightning came crashing down from the sky. Trees were uprooted by the wind. The sea came rolling over in giant tidal waves. Volcanoes erupted. Earth quaked. The landlord's voice was clearly heard above the din, telling everybody to pack their suitcases and start walking. Eviction orders were being served. Adam and Eve were doing something in the bushes.

Offa's time machine was already moving off, into the future. No way was he staying around to take the can for that lot. When he pulled up, in his own time, he fell off the machine and rolled in the grass. He went to get up and found he couldn't. He had no arms or legs.

Nearby, a group of snakes were having a picnic by a stream. One of the children had its hand in the hamper when it saw him wriggling down the bank.

"Daddy, daddy. There's an Offa," it cried in a shrill voice.

The serpent with the pipe stood up and grabbed a stick.

"You stay there, darling," it said. "Daddy will soon kill the nasty Offa. Never could tell which of them were poisonous."

Offa hissed. The serpent went pale and backed off a few steps.

"Maybe we ought to go home instead," it said. ●

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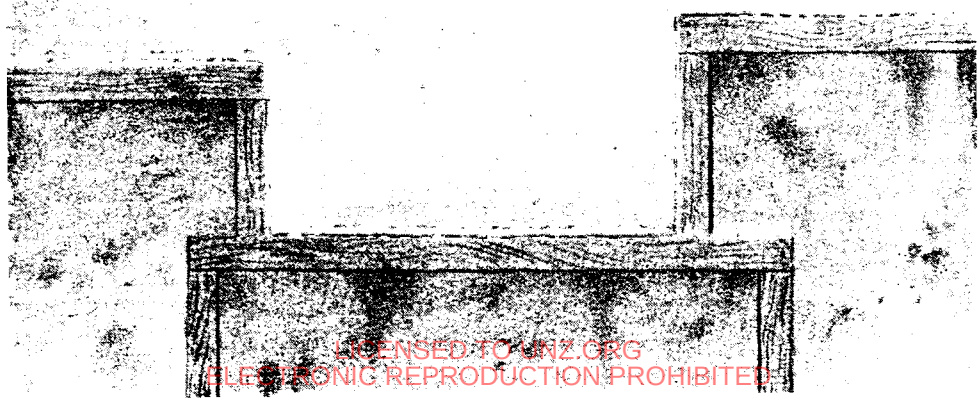
THE CURSE OF KINGS

by Connie Willis

art: Robert Walters

Connie Willis' current projects include a novel, tentatively titled *The Gems of Treason*, which she is writing in collaboration with Cynthia Felice, and another, *The Three Bears*, which she is writing on her own. We hope the time she'll need for these novels doesn't prevent her from sending us more of her complex and beautiful shorter pieces.



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There was a curse. It lay on all of us, though we didn't know it. Anyway Lacau didn't. Standing there, reading the tomb seal out loud to me in my cage, he didn't have a clue who the warning was meant for. And the Sandalman, standing on the black ridge watching the bodies burn, had no idea he had already fallen victim to it.

The princess knew, leaning her head in hopelessness against the wall of her tomb ten thousand years ago. And Evelyn, eaten alive by it, she knew. She tried to tell me that last night on Colchis while we waited for the ship.

The electricity was off again, and Lacau had lit a photosene lamp and put it close to the translator so I could see the dials. Evelyn's voice had gotten so bad that the fix needed constant adjusting. The lamp's flame lit only the space around me. Lacau, bending over the hammock, was in total darkness.

Evelyn's bey sat by the lamp, watching the reddish flame, her mouth open and her black teeth shining in the light. I expected her to stick her hand in the flame any minute, but she didn't. The air was still and full of dust. The lamp flame didn't even flicker.

"Evie," Lacau said. "We don't have any time left. The Sandalman's soldiers will be here before morning. They'll never let us leave."

Evelyn said something, but the translator didn't pick it up.

"Move the mike closer," I said. "I didn't get that."

"Evie," he said again. "We need you to tell us what happened. Can you do that for us, Evie? Tell us what happened?"

She tried again. I had the volume dial kicked as high as it would go, and the translator picked it up this time, but only as static. Evelyn started to cough, a sharp, terrible sound that the translator turned into a scream.

"For God's sake, put her on the respirator," I said.

"I can't," he said. "The power pack is dead." And the other respirator has to be plugged in, I thought, and you've used up all the extension cords. But I didn't say it. Because if he put her on the respirator, he would have to unplug the refrigerator.

"Then get her a drink of water," I said.

He took the Coke bottle off the crate by the hammock, put the straw in it, and leaned into the darkness to tilt Evelyn's head forward so she could drink. I turned the translator off. It was bad enough listening to her try to talk. I didn't think I could stand listening to her try to drink.

After what seemed like an hour, he set the Coke bottle down on the crate again. "Evelyn," he said. "Try to tell us what happened. Did you go in the tomb?"

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I switched the translator back on and kept my finger ready on the record button. There was no point in recording the tortured sounds she was making.

"Curse," Evelyn said clearly, and I pushed the button down. "Don't open it. Don't open it." She stopped and tried to swallow. "Wuhdayuh?"

"What day is it?" the translator said.

She tried to swallow again, and Lacau reached for the Coke bottle, pulled the straw out, and handed it to the bey. "Go get some more water." The little bey stood up, her black eyes still fixed on the flame, and took the bottle. "Hurry," Lacau said.

"Hurry," Evelyn said. "Before bey."

"Did you open the tomb when the bey went to get the Sandalman?"

"Oh, don't open it. Don't open it. Sorry. Didn't know."

"Didn't know what, Evelyn?" Lacau said.

The bey was still staring, fascinated, at the flame, her mouth open so that I could see her shiny black teeth. I looked at the thick green bottle she was holding in her dirty-looking hands. The straw in it was glass, too, thick and uneven and full of bubbles, probably made out at the bottling plant. Its sides were scored with long scratches. Evelyn had made those scratches when she sucked the water up through the straw. One more day and she'll have it cut to ribbons, I thought, and then remembered we didn't have one more day. Not unless Evelyn's bey suddenly pitched forward into the red flame, honeycombs sharpening on her dirty brown skin, inside her throat, inside her lungs.

"Hurry," Evelyn said into the hypnotic silence, and the little bey looked over at the hammock as if she had just woken up and hurried out of the room with the Coke bottle. "Hurry. What day is it? Have to save the treasure. He'll murder her."

"Who, Evelyn? Who'll murder her? Who will he murder?"

"We shouldn't have gone in," she said, and let her breath out in a sigh that sounded like sand scratching on glass. "Beware. Curse of kings."

"She's quoting what was on the door seal," Lacau said. He straightened up. "They did go in the tomb," he said. "I suppose you got that on your recorder."

"No," I said, and pushed "erase." "She still isn't down from the dilaudid. I'll start recording when she starts making sense."

"The Commission would have found for the Sandalman," Lacau said. "Howard swore they didn't go in, that they waited for the Sandalman."

"What difference does it make?" I said. "Evelyn won't be alive to testify at any Commission hearing and neither will we if the Sandalman and his soldiers get here before the ship, so what the hell difference does it make? There won't be any treasure left either after the commission gets

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through, so why are we making this damned recording? By the time the Commission hears it, it'll be too late to save her."

"What if it *was* something in the tomb, after all? What if it *was* a virus?"

"It wasn't," I said. "The Sandalman poisoned them. If it was a virus, then why doesn't the bey have it? She was in the tomb with them, wasn't she?"

"Hurry," somebody said, and I thought for a minute it was Evelyn, but it was the bey. She came running into the room, the Coke bottle splashing water everywhere.

"What is it?" Lacau said. "Is the ship here?"

She yanked at his hand. "Hurry," she said, and dragged him down the long hall of packing crates.

"Hurry," Evelyn said softly, like an echo, and I got up and went over to the hammock. I could hardly see her, which made it a little easier. I unclenched my fists and said, "It's me, Evelyn. It's Jack."

"Jack," she said. I could hardly hear her. Lacau had clipped the mike to the plastic mesh that was pulled up to her neck, but she was fading fast and starting to wheeze again. She needed a shot of the morphate. It would ease her breathing, but this soon after the dilaudid it would put her out like a light.

"I delivered the message to the Sandalman," I said, leaning over to catch what she would say. "What was in the message, Evelyn?"

"Jack," she said. "What day is it?"

I had to think. It felt like I had been here years. "Wednesday," I said.

"Tomorrow," she said. She closed her eyes and seemed to relax almost into sleep.

I was not going to get anything out of her. I sprayed on plasticgloves, picked up the injection kit, and broke it open. The morphate would put her out in minutes, but until then she would be free from the pain and maybe coherent.

Her arm had fallen over the side of the hammock. I moved the lamp a little closer and tried to find a place to give the injection. Her whole arm was covered with a network of honeycombed white ridges, some of them nearly two centimeters high now. They had softened and thickened since the first time I'd seen her. Then they had been thin and razor-sharp. There was no way I was going to be able to find a vein among them, but as I watched, the heat from the photosene flame softened a circle of skin on her forearm, and the five-sided ridges collapsed around it so I could get the hypo in.

I jabbed twice before blood pooled up in the soft depression where the needle had gone in. It dripped onto the floor. I looked around, but there was nothing to wipe it up with. Lacau had used the last of the cotton

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this morning. I took a piece of paper off my notebook and blotted the blood with it.

The bey had come back in. She ducked under my elbow with a piece of plastic mesh held out flat. I folded the paper up and dropped it in the center of the plastic. The bey folded the plastic mesh over it and folded up the ends, making it into a kind of packet, careful not to touch the blood. I stood and looked at it.

"Jack," Evelyn said. "She was murdered."

"Murdered?" I said and reached over to adjust the fix again. All I got was feedback. "Who was murdered, Evelyn?"

"The princess. They killed her. For the treasure." The morphate was taking effect. I could make her words out easily, though they didn't make sense. Nobody had murdered the princess. She had been dead ten thousand years. I leaned farther over her.

"Tell me what was in the message you gave me to take to the Sandalman, Evelyn," I said.

The lights came on. She put her hand over her face as if to hide it. "Murdered the Sandalman's bey. Had to. To save the treasure."

I looked over at the little bey. She was still holding the packet of plastic, turning it over and over in her dirty-looking hands.

"Nobody murdered the bey," I said. "She's right here."

She didn't hear me. The shot was taking effect. Her hand relaxed and then slid down to her breast. Where it had pressed against her forehead and cheek, the fingers had left deep imprints in the wax-soft skin. The pressure of her fingers had flattened the honeycombed ridges at the ends of her fingers and pushed them back so that the ends of her bones were sticking out.

She opened her eyes. "Jack," she said clearly, and her voice was so hopeless I reached over and turned the translator off. "Too late."

Lacau pushed past me and lifted up the mesh drape. "What did she say?" he demanded.

"Nothing," I said, peeling off the plasticgloves and throwing them in the open packing crate we were using for the things Evelyn had touched. The bey was still playing with the plastic packet she had wrapped around the blood-soaked paper. I grabbed it away from her and put it in the box. "She's delirious," I said. "I gave her her shot. Is the ship here?"

"No," he said, "but the Sandalman is."

"Curse," Evelyn said. But I didn't believe her.

I had been burning eight columns about a curse when I intercepted the message from Lacau. I was halfway across Colchis's endless desert continent with the Lisii team. I had run out of stories on the team's incredible find, which consisted of two clay pots and some black bones.

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Two pots was more than Howard's team out at the Spine had come up with in five years, and my hotline had been making noises about pulling me off on the next circuit ship.

I didn't think they would as long as AP kept Bradstreet on the planet. When and if anybody found the treasure they were all looking for, the hotline that had somebody on Colchis would be the one that got the scoop. And in the meantime good stories would see to it that I was in the right place at the right time when the story of the century finally broke, so I'd hotfooted it up north to cover a two-bit suhundulim massacre and then out here to Lisii. When the pots gave out I made up a curse.

It wasn't much of a curse—no murders, no avalanches, no mysterious fires—but every time somebody sprained an ankle or got bitten by a kheper, I got at least four columns out of it.

After my first one, headered, "Curse of Kings Strikes Again," went out, Howard, over at the Spine, sent me a ground-to-ground that read, "The curse has to be in the same place as the treasure, Jackie-boy!"

I burned back, "If the treasure's over there, what am I doing stuck out here? Find something so I can come back."

I didn't get an answer to that, and the Lisii team didn't find any more bones, and the curse grew and grew. Six rocks the size of my thumbnail rattled down a lava slope the Lisii team had just walked down, and I headered my story, "Mysterious Rockfall Nearly Buries Archaeologists: Is King's Curse Responsible?" and was feeding it into the burner when I heard the sizzle I'd set up to alert me to the consul's transmissions. Hotline reporters weren't supposed to trespass on official transmissions, and Lacau, the consul over at the Spine, had double-cooked his to make sure we didn't, but burners have only so many firelines, and I'd had enough time on Lisii to try them all.

It was a ship-in-area request. He'd put, "Hurry," at the end of it. The circuit ship was only a month away, and he couldn't wait for it. They'd found something.

I burned the rest of my story. Then I hit ground-to-ground and sent Howard a copy of the header with the tag, "Found anything yet?" I didn't get an answer.

I went out and found the team and asked them if there was anything anybody needed from the base camp, one of my shock boards had gone bad and I was going to run in. I made a list of what they wanted, loaded my equipment in the jeep, and took off for the Spine.

I burned stories all the way, sending them ground-to-ground to the relay I kept in my tent back at Lisii, so it would look to Bradstreet like my stories were still coming from there. I had to stop the jeep every time and set up the burn equipment, but I didn't want him heading for the

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Spine. He was still up north, waiting for another massacre, but he had a Swallow that could get him to the Spine in a day and a half.

So I sent out a story headered, "Khepers Threaten Team's Life—Curse's Agents?" about the tick-like khepers, who sucked the blood out of anybody dumb enough to stick his hand down a hole. Since the Lisii team made their living doing just that, their arms were spotted with white circles of dead skin where the poison had entered their blood. The bites didn't heal, and your blood was toxic for a week or so, which prompted somebody to put up a sign on the barracks that read, "No Nibbling Allowed," with a skull-and-crossbones under it. I didn't say that in my story, of course. I made them out to be agents of the dead curse, wreaking vengeance on whoever dared disturb the sleep of Colchis's ancient kings.

The second day out I intercepted an answer from a ship. It was an Amenti freighter, and it was a long way away, but it was coming. It could make it in a week. Lacau's answer was only one word. "Hurry."

If I was going to beat the ship in, I couldn't waste any more time burning stories. I pulled out some back-up tapes I'd made, deliberately dateless, and sent those: a flattering piece on Lacau, the long-suffering consul who has to keep the peace and divide the treasure, interviews with Howard and Borchardt, a not-so-flattering piece on the local dictator-type, the Sandalman, a recap of the accidental discovery of the ransacked tombs in the Spine that had brought Howard and his gang here in the first place. I was taking a risk doing all these stories on the Spine, but I hoped Bradstreet would check the transmission-point and decide I was trying to throw him off. With luck he'd tear off to Lisii in his damned Swallow, convinced the team had struck pay dirt and I was trying to keep it a secret till I got my scoop.

I skidded into the Sandalman's village six days after I left Lisii. I was still a day and a half from the Spine, but with the ship due in two days they had to be here, where it would land, and not out at the Spine.

There was a deathly silence over the white clay settlement that reminded me of someplace else. It was a little after five. Afternoon nap time. Nobody would be up till at least six, but I knocked on the consul's door anyway. Nobody was home, and the place was locked up tight. I peeked in through the cloth blinds, but I couldn't see much. What I could see was that Lacau's burn equipment wasn't on the desk, and that worried me. There was nobody home in the low building the Spine team used as a barracks either, and where the hell was everybody? They wouldn't still be out at the Spine, not with a ship coming in tomorrow. Maybe the ship had come and gone two days ahead of schedule.

I hadn't burned a story since the day before yesterday. I'd run out of tapes and I hadn't dared risk taking the time to stop and set up the equipment when it might mean getting there too late. Over at Lisii I

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had been careful every once in awhile to let my stories pile up for two or three days and then send them all at once so that Bradstreet wouldn't immediately jump to conclusions when I missed a deadline. He was going to catch on pretty soon, though, and I didn't have anything else to do. I wasn't going to go tearing off to the Spine until I'd talked to somebody and made sure that was where they were, and I couldn't go at night anyway, so I sat down on the low clay step of the barracks porch, set up my burn equipment, and ran a check on the ship. Still on its way. It would be here day after tomorrow. So where was the team? Curse Strikes Again? Team Disappears?

I couldn't do that story, so I whipped off a couple of columns on the one member of the Howard team I hadn't met—Evelyn Herbert. She'd joined the team right after I went north to cover the massacre, and I didn't know much about her. Bradstreet had said she was beautiful. Actually that wasn't what he'd said. He said she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, but that was because we were stuck in Khamsin and had drunk a fifth of gin in endless bottles of Coke. "She has this face," he said, "like Helen of Troy's. A face that could launch . . ." The comparison had petered out since if there was anything on Colchis to launch neither of us was sober enough to think of it. "Even the Sandalman's crazy about her."

I had refused to believe that. "No, really," Bradstreet had protested sloppily, "he's given her presents, he even gave her her own bey, he wanted her to move into his private compound but she wouldn't. I tell you, you've got to see her. She's beautiful."

I still hadn't believed it, but it made a good story. I burned it as the romance of the century, and that took care of yesterday's story. But what about today's?

I went around and knocked on all the doors again. It was still awfully quiet, and I'd remembered what it reminded me of—Khamsin right after the massacre. What if Lacau's hysterical, "Hurry!" had had something to do with the Sandalman? What if the Sandalman had taken one look at the treasure and decided he wanted it all for himself? I sat back down, and burned a story on the Commission. Whenever there was a controversy over archaeological finds, the Commission on Antiquities came and sat on it until everybody was bored and ready to give up. Everyone took them far more seriously than they deserved to be taken. Once they'd even been called in to settle who owned a planet when a dig turned up proof that the so-called natives had really landed in a spaceship several thousand years before. The Commission took this on with a straight face, even if it was like the Neanderthals demanding Earth back, listened to evidence for something over four years, as if they were actually going to do something, and finally recessed to review the accumulated heaps

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of testimony and let the opposing sides fight it out for themselves. They were still in recess ten years later, but I didn't say that in the story. I wrote up the Commission as the arm of archeaological justice—fair but stern and woe to anybody who gets greedy. Maybe it would make the Sandalman think twice about massacreing Howard's team and taking all the treasure for himself, if he hadn't done that already.

There still weren't any signs of life, and what if that meant there weren't any signs of life? I went the round of the doors again, afraid one of them would swing open on a heap of bodies. But unlike Khamsin, there were no signs of destruction either. There hadn't been a massacre. They were probably all over at the Sandalman's divvying up the treasure.

There was no way to see into the high-walled compound. I rattled the fancy iron gate, and a bey I didn't recognize came out. She was carrying a photosene lantern, bringing it out to be lit before the sun went down, and I was not sure she'd heard me banging on the gate. She looked old.

It's hard to tell with beys, who never get bigger than twelve-year-olds. Their black hair doesn't turn gray and they don't usually lose their black teeth, but this one was wearing a black robe instead of a shift, which meant she had a high station in the Sandalman's household even though I didn't remember her, and her forearms were covered with kheper bites. Either she was exceptionally curious, even for a bey, or she'd been around awhile.

"Is the Sandalman here?" I said.

She didn't answer. She hung the lantern on a hook off to the inside of the gate and watched as the pool of photo-chemical liquid in its base caught fire.

"I need to see the Sandalman," I said more loudly. She must be hard of hearing.

"No one in," she said, her dished face impassive. Did that mean the Sandalman wasn't there or that she wasn't supposed to let anybody in?

"Is the Sandalman here?" I said. "I want to see him."

"No one in," she repeated. The Sandalman's other bey had been a lot easier to get information out of. I had given her a pocket mirror and made a friend for life. The fact that she wasn't here probably meant the Sandalman wasn't either. But where had they gone?

"I'm a reporter," I said, and stuck my press card at her. "Show him this. I think he'll want to talk to me."

She looked at the card, rubbed her dirty-looking finger along the smooth plastic, and turned it over.

"Where is he? Out at the Spine?"

The bey turned the card back over to the front. She poked at the hotline's holo-banner with the same finger, as if she could stick it between the three-dimensional letters.

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"Where's Lacau? Where's Howard? Where's the Sandalman?"

She held the card up sideways and peered along its edge. She flipped it over, looking at the letters, and turned it sideways again, slowly, watching the three-dimensional effect go flat.

"Look," I said. "You can keep the press card. It's a present. Just tell your boss I'm here."

She was trying to pry the 3-D letters up with the tip of her black fingernail. I should never have given her the press card.

I opened up my knapsack, got out a bottle of Coke, and held it out to her, just this side of the gate. She actually looked up from the press card long enough to grab for it. I took a step backward. "Where are the dig men?" I said, and then remembered it's the bey women who run things, if you could call running errands for the suhundulim and drinking Cokes running things, but at least they were up most of the day. The male beys slept, and the females ignored them and any other male who wasn't giving them a direct order, but they might notice a female. "Where's Evelyn Herbert?"

"Big cloud," she said.

Big cloud? What did that mean? This wasn't the season for the big desert-drenching thunderstorms. A fire? A ship?

"Where?" I said.

She reached for the Coke bottle. I let her almost get it. "Big cloud where?"

She pointed east to where the lava spills formed a low ridge. The flat basin beyond was where they landed the ships. What if some other ship had responded to Lacau's message? Some ship that had already been and gone, team and treasure with it?

"Ship?" I said.

"No," she said, and made a lunge through the bars for the Coke. "Big cloud."

I gave it to her. She retreated to the front steps of the main house and sat down. She took a swig of the Coke and turned the press card over and over in her other hand, making it flash in the sunlight.

"How long has it been there?" I said.

She didn't even act like she'd heard me.

On the way out to the ridge I convinced myself the bey had seen a dust devil. I didn't want to believe a ship had been and gone with the treasure and the team. Maybe if it was a ship, it was still there.

It wasn't. I could see the half-mile circle of scorched dirt where they always landed the ships even before I got to the top of the ridge, and it was empty, but I went on up. And there was the big cloud. A plastic-mesh geodome in the middle of the basin. The consul's landrover was

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parked on the far side of it and several crawlers that they must have used to bring the treasure down from the Spine.

I hid the jeep behind a hump of lava and then crept around behind the rocks until I could see in the front door. There were a couple of suhundulim guarding the tent, which was the best proof yet that there was a treasure. The Commission's only ruling said that the archaeologist's government got half of everything and the "natives" got the other half. The Sandalman would be making sure he got his half. I was surprised Howard hadn't posted a guard, too, since the ruling said any tampering with the treasure meant forfeiture of the whole thing by the offending party. At Lisii the guards had practically sat on those poor skeletons and clay shards to make sure nobody sneaked a shinbone in his pocket and hoping somebody would so they could claim the whole treasure by default.

I'd never get past the Sandalman's guards. If I wanted a story I'd have to go in the back door. I crept as far back as the jeep and then down the ridge, keeping as much rock between me and the guards as I could. I didn't take my burn equipment. I wasn't sure I could even get in, and I didn't want somebody confiscating it on the grounds that burning a story was tampering. Besides, the black lava was honeycombed with sharp-edged holes. I didn't want to risk dropping my equipment and breaking it.

I kept out of sight as long as I could and then ran across the open sand to the side of the dome away from the consul's landrover and ducked under the outer layer of mesh. The tent didn't have a back door. I hadn't expected it to. The Lisii team had a tent just like this for storing their clay pots, and the only way in was under the mesh at the bottom. But the sides of this "big cloud" were packed with boxes and equipment right up to the walls.

I edged along the side of the tent until I came to a place where the plastic gave a little, and slit it with my knife. I looked through the slit, saw nothing but more plastic mesh a few feet away, and squeezed through.

I scared the little bey who was standing there half to death. She flattened herself against one of the packing cases, clutching a Coke bottle with a straw in it.

She'd scared me, too. "Shh," I said, and put my finger to my lips, but she didn't scream. She hung onto the Coke bottle for dear life and started edging away from me.

"Hey," I said softly. "Don't be scared. You know me." Now I knew where the Sandalman had to be because here was his bey. The old one at the gate must have been left to guard the compound while they were out here. "Remember, I gave you the mirror?" I whispered. "Where's your boss? Where's the Sandalman?"

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She stopped and looked at me, her big eyes wide. "Mirror," she said, and nodded, but she didn't come any closer and she let go of the Coke bottle.

"Where's the Sandalman?" I asked her again. No answer. "Where are dig men?" I said. Still no answer. "Where is Evelyn Herbert?"

"Evelyn," she said, and stretched out one dirty-looking arm to point in the direction of a plastic curtain. I ducked through it.

This area of the tent was draped on all sides with plastic mesh, making a kind of low-ceilinged room. The packing cases that were stacked against the side of the tent shut out most of the evening light, and I could hardly see. There was some kind of hammock affair near the wall, hung with more plastic. I could hear someone breathing heavily, unevenly.

"Evelyn?" I said.

The bey had followed me into the room. "Is there a light?" I said to her. She ducked past me and pulled on a string to light a single light bulb hanging from a tangle of cords. Then she backed over against the far wall. The breathing was coming from the hammock.

"Evelyn?" I said, and lifted up the plastic drape.

"Oh," I said, and it came out like a groan. I put my hand over my mouth as if I were trying to get out of a fire, choking on the smoke, smothering, and backed way from the hammock. I practically backed into the little bey, who was pressed so flat against the flimsy wall I thought she was going to go right through it.

"What's wrong with her?" I grabbed her by her bony little shoulders. "What happened?"

I was scaring her to death. There was no way she could answer me. I let go of her shoulders and she pressed herself into the plastic folds of the wall till she nearly disappeared.

"What's wrong with her?" I whispered, and knew my voice still sounded terrifying. "Is it some kind of virus?"

"Curse," the little bey said, and the lights went out.

I stood there in the dark, and I could hear Evelyn's ragged, tortured breathing and the rapid, frightened sound of my own, and for one minute I believed the bey. Then the light came on again, and I looked over at the plastic-draped hammock, and knew I was standing only a few feet away from the biggest story I was ever going to get.

"Curse," the little bey repeated, and I thought, "No, it's not a curse. It's my scoop."

I went over to the hammock again and lifted the plastic drape with two fingers and looked at what had been Evelyn Herbert. A padded mesh blanket was pulled up to her neck, and her hands were crossed over her chest. They were covered with a network of white ridges, even on the fingernails. In the depressions between the ridges the skin was so thin

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it was transparent. I could see the veins and the raw red tissue under them.

Whatever it was covered her face, too, even her eyelids and the inside of her open mouth. Over her cheekbones the white honeycombs were thicker and farther apart, and they looked so soft I thought her bones would poke through at any moment. My skin crawled at the thought that the plastic might be covered with the virus, that I might already have been infected when I came into the room.

She opened her eyes, and I gripped the plastic so hard I almost yanked it down. Tiny honeycombs, so fine they looked like spiderwebs, filmed her eyes. I don't know if she could see me or not.

"Evelyn," I said. "My name is Jack Merton. I'm a reporter. Can you talk?"

She made a strangled sound. I couldn't make it out. She shut her eyes and tried again, and this time I understood her.

"Help me," she said.

"What do you want me to do?" I said.

She made a series of sounds that had to be words but I had no idea what they were. I wished to God the translator was here instead of in the jeep.

She tried to raise herself up by the muscles in her shoulders and back, not even attempting to use her hands. She coughed, a hard, scraping sound, as if she were trying to clear her throat, and made a sound.

"I've got a machine that will make it easier for you to talk," I said. "A translator. Out in my jeep. I'll go get it."

She said clearly, "No," and then the same string of unintelligible sounds.

"I can't understand you," I said, and she reached out suddenly and took hold of my shirt. I backed away so fast I knocked into the lightbulb and sent it swinging. The little bey edged out from the wall to watch it.

"Treasure," Evelyn said, and took a long dragging breath. "Sandalman. Poy. Son."

"Poison?" I said. The light swung wildly over her. I looked at my shirt front. It was cut to pieces where she had grabbed it, slashed into long ribbons by those ridges on her hands. "Who poisoned you? The Sandalman?"

"Help me," she said.

"Was the treasure poisoned, Evelyn?"

She tried to shake her head.

"Take . . . message."

"Message? To who?"

"San . . . man," she said, and her muscles gave way and she sank back

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against the hammock, coughing and taking little rasping breaths in between.

I stepped back so her coughing couldn't reach me. "Why? Are you trying to warn the Sandalman that somebody poisoned you? Why do you want me to take a message to the Sandalman?"

She had stopped coughing. She lay looking up at me. "Help me," she said.

"If I take your message to the Sandalman, will you tell me what happened?" I said. "Will you tell me who poisoned you?"

She tried to nod and started coughing again. The little bey sprang forward with a Coke bottle, stuck a glass straw in it, and tipped it forward so Evelyn could drink. Some of the water spilled onto her chin and into her mouth, and the bey wiped it away with the tail of her dirty-looking shift. Evelyn tried to raise herself up again, and the bey helped her, putting her arm around Evelyn's ridge-covered shoulders. The ridges there were as thick as those on her face, and they didn't seem to cut the bey. If anything, they seemed to flatten a little under the weight of the bey's arm. She stuck the straw in Evelyn's mouth. Evelyn choked and started coughing again. The bey waited, and then tried again, and this time Evelyn got a drink. She lay back.

"Yes," she said, more clearly than she had said anything so far. "Lamp."

I thought I had misunderstood her. "What's the message, Evelyn?" I said. "What do you want to tell him?"

"Lamp," she said again, and tried to gesture with her hand. I turned around and looked. A photosene lamp stood on an upturned plastic cargo carton. Next to it were two disposable injection kits, the kind you find in portable first aid kits, and a plastic packet. The bey handed it to me. I took it from her gingerly, hoping Evelyn hadn't touched the packet, that the bey had put the message inside for her. Then I looked at her hands again and my slashed shirt and knew the bey had not only had to put the message in the plastic envelope, she had probably had to write it out for her, too. I hoped it was readable.

I stuck it in the foil-lined pouch I used for my spare burn-charges and tried to fight the feeling that I needed to wash my hands. I went back over to the hammock. "Where is he? Is he here, in the dome?"

She tried to shake her head again. I was beginning to be able to understand her motions, but I wished again for the translator so I could be sure of what she was saying. "No," she said, and coughed. "Not here. Compound. Village."

"He's in the compound? Are you sure? I was there this afternoon. I didn't see anybody but one of his beys."

She sighed, a terrible sound like a candle guttering out in the wind. "Compound. Hurry."

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"All right," I said. "I'll try to get back before dark."

"Hurry," she said, and started to cough again.

I ducked out the way I had come. On the way out I asked the bey if the Sandalman was really back at the compound.

"North," she said. "Soldiers." Which could mean any number of things.

"He's gone north?" I said. "He isn't at the compound?"

"Compound," she said. "Treasure."

"But he's not here, in the tent? Are you sure?"

"Compound," she said. "Soldiers."

I gave up. I glanced around the plastic-hung hall I was in, wondering if I should try to find Howard or Lacau or somebody before I went traipsing back to the compound to look for the Sandalman. There was hardly any light left. If I waited much longer, it would be dark, and I couldn't run the risk of being kept here by an indignant Lacau, with the message burning a hole in my pocket. At least if I went back to the jeep I could read the message, and that might give me a clue as to what in the hell was going on around here. I thought there was a good chance the Sandalman actually was in the compound. If he had gone north he wouldn't have left his bey behind.

I went back out through the slit I'd made and hotfooted it across the space of open plain to the safety of the ridge. Once there, I took my sticklight out and kept it trained on my feet so I wouldn't fall in a hole. I stopped halfway up in the shadow of a long black crevice, to catch my breath and read the message. There wouldn't be enough light if I waited till I got up to the jeep. It was already dark enough that I was going to have to use the sticklight. I pulled the burn pouch out of my shirt and started to open it.

"Come back!" a voice shouted directly beneath me. I flattened myself into the crevice like Evelyn's bey. The sticklight skittered away and down a hole.

"Come back! You don't have to touch him! I'll do that!" I raised my head a little and looked down. It had been some freak of acoustics produced by the face of the lava ridge. Lacau was nowhere near me. He, and two stocky figures in white robes who had to be suhundulim, were on the other side of the tent, so far away I could hardly make them out in the deepening twilight, though Lacau's voice was coming through as clearly as if he were standing directly beneath me.

"I'll do the burying, for God's sake. All you have to do is dig the grave." Lacau turned and gestured toward the tent, and his voice cut off. Whose grave? I looked where he was gesturing and could make out a bluish-gray shape on the sand. A body wrapped in plastic. "The Sandalman sent

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you here to guard the treasure, and that includes doing what I tell you," Lacau said. "When he gets back, I'll . . ."

I didn't hear the rest of it, but whatever he had said had not convinced them. They continued to back away from him, and after a minute they turned and ran. I was glad it was nearly dark so I couldn't see them. The suhundulim have always given me the creeps. Bands of herniated muscle ripple under their skin, especially on their faces and their hands and feet. When Bradstreet burns stories about them, he describes them as looking like welts or rope burns, but he's crazy. They look like snakes. The Sandalman isn't too bad—he's got a lot on his feet, which Bradstreet said looked like sandals when he burned the story that gave the Sandalman his name, but hardly any on his face.

The Sandalman. He must be at the compound because Lacau had said, "When he gets back." None of them were looking my way, so I went up and over the ridge as quietly as I could in case the echo thing worked both ways.

There was still enough light in the west to drive by. I thought about stopping midway, switching on the headlights, and reading Evelyn's message in their beam, but I didn't want Lacau to see my lights and figure out where I'd been. I could read the message by one of the lights in the village before I got to the Sandalman's.

I didn't turn on my lights until I couldn't see my hand in front of my face, and when I did I saw I'd practically crashed into the village wall. There weren't any lights along the wall. I left my jeep lights on, wishing I could drive the jeep into the village.

As soon as I was inside the wall, I could see the lantern I'd watched the bey hang out. It was the only light in the whole place, and there was still that massacre-quiet. Maybe they'd found out what was lying in that hammock in the plastic-dome and had taken off like the suhundulim guards.

I went over to the Sandalman's gate and looked up at the lantern. It was just out of my reach or I would have lifted it off its hook and gone off to the shelter of an alley where I could read the message without anybody seeing me. Including the Sandalman. I didn't think he'd take kindly to somebody opening his mail. I huddled against the wall and pulled out the burn pouch.

"No one in," the bey said. She still had the press card in her hand. It looked gnawed around the edges. She must have been sitting on the steps ever since this afternoon, trying to get the holo-letters out.

"I have to see the Sandalman," I said. "Let me in. I have a message for him."

She was looking at the burn pouch curiously. I stuck it back in my pocket.

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"Let me in," I said. "Go tell the Sandalman I'm here and I want to see him. Tell him I have a message for him."

"Message," the bey said, watching the pocket where the burn pouch had gone.

I gave up and pulled the pouch out of my shirt. I took the plastic packet out and showed it to her. "Message. For Sandalman. Let me in."

"No one in," she said. "I take." Her hand lunged through the iron gate.

I yanked the packet away from her. "Message not for you. For Sandalman. Take me to Sandalman. Now."

I had frightened her. She backed away from the gate toward the steps. "No one in," she said, and sat down. She began turning the press card over and over in her dirty-looking hands.

"I'll give you something," I said. "If you take the message to the Sandalman, I'll give you something. Better than the press card."

She came back to the gate, still looking suspicious. I had no idea what I had on me that she might like. I rummaged in my torn shirt pocket and came up with a pen that had holo-letters down its side. "I'll give you this," I said, holding it out in one hand. "You tell Sandalman I have message for him." I held the packet out, too, so she would understand. "Let me in," I said.

She was faster than a striking snake. One minute she was edging forward, looking at the pen. The next she had the packet. She grabbed the lantern off its hook and ran up the steps.

"Don't," I said. "Wait." The door shut behind her. I couldn't see a thing.

Great. The bey would make a nice meal of the message, I was no closer to a story than I had been, and Evelyn would probably be dead by the time I got back to the dome. I felt my way along the wall till I could see the jeep's lights. They were starting to dim. Great. Now the battery was going. I would not have been surprised to find Bradstreet sitting in the driver's seat, burning a story on my equipment.

I didn't have a prayer of finding my way back to the dome in the pitch black that was Colchis's night, so I left the lights on and hoped Lacau wouldn't see me coming. Even with them on, I high-centered the jeep twice and crashed into a chunk of lava that cast no shadow at all.

I took my shredded shirt off and left it in the jeep. It took me forever to get down the ridge in the dark, carrying the translator and my burn equipment, and the slit I had made in the tent wasn't big enough for me and the bulky boxes. I set them down, slipped through the slit backwards, and pulled the burn box through after me. I hefted the translator onto my shoulder.

"What took you so long, Jack?" Lacau said. "The Sandalman's guards have been gone a couple of hours. I knew I shouldn't have tried to get

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them to help me. Now they've run away and you've gotten in. Is Bradstreet here, too?"

I turned around. Lacau was standing there, looking like he hadn't slept in a week.

"Why don't you go right back out the way you came in and I'll pretend I never saw you?" he said.

"I'm here to get a story," I said. "You don't really think I'll leave till I get it, do you? I want to see Howard."

"No," Lacau said.

"Right to know," I said, and reached automatically for the press card the bey was probably chewing on right now. If she hadn't already started on Evelyn's message. "You can't deny a hotline reporter access to the principals in a story."

"He's dead," Lacau said. "I buried him this afternoon."

I tried to look like I had come to get a story about a treasure, like I'd never seen the horror that lay in the hammock down the hall, and I guess I did okay because Lacau didn't look suspicious. Maybe he had stopped looking and feeling shock and didn't expect it from me. Or maybe I looked just like I was supposed to.

"Dead?" I said, and tried to remember what he looked like, but all I could see was what was left of Evelyn's face, and her hands clutching my shirt, sharp as a razor and not even looking like a hand.

"What about Callender?"

"He's dead, too. They're all dead except Borchardt and Herbert, and they can't talk. You got here too late."

The strap of the translator was digging into my bare shoulder. I shifted to adjust it.

"What's that?" he said. "A translator? Can it do anything with distorted language? With somebody who can't talk because of . . . can it do that?"

"Yes," I said. "What's going on? What happened to Howard and the others?"

"I'm confiscating your burn equipment," he said. "And your translator."

"You can't do that," I said, and started to back away from him. "Hotline reporters have free access."

"Not in here they don't. Give me the translator."

"What do you need it for? I thought you said Borchardt and Herbert couldn't talk."

Lacau reached behind him. "Pick up the burn equipment and come this way," he said, and pulled out a photosene flamethrower made out of what looked like a Coke bottle and a mirror, one of the homemade jobs the suhundulim had massacred everybody with. Lacau tilted it so the mirror was under the light bulb hanging above us. I picked up the burn equipment.

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He led me away from Evelyn, through a maze of cargo cartons and boxes to the center of the tent. Plastic mesh was draped over where I thought Borchardt might be lying in a hammock like Evelyn's. If he'd hoped to get me lost, it hadn't worked. I could find Evelyn easily. All I had to do was follow the web-like tangle of electrical cords.

The center area looked like a warehouse, piles of open crates everywhere, shovels and picks and sifters, all the archaeologists' equipment, stacked against them. Their packs and sleeping bags were over at one side in a tangled heap next to a pile of flattened cargo cartons. In the middle was a wire cage and facing it, directly under another mess of electrical cords and plugged into it, was a refrigerator. It was big, an ancient double-door commercial job, and I would have bet it came from the Coca-Cola bottling plant. No sign of the treasure, unless it was all already packed. Or in cold storage. I wondered what the cage was for.

"Put down the equipment," Lacau said, and started fiddling with the mirror again. "Get in the cage."

"Where's your burn equipment?" I said.

"None of your business."

"Look," I said. "You've got your job to do, and I've got mine. All I want is a story."

"A story?" Lacau said. He shoved me into the cage. "How about this for a story? You've just been exposed to a deadly virus. You're under quarantine," he said, and reached up and turned out the light.

Boy, I really knew how to get a story. First the Sandalman's bey and now Lacau, and I was no closer to knowing what was going on than when I was back at Lisii, and maybe only hours away from coming down with what was eating Evelyn. I rattled the wire mesh and yelled for Lacau awhile. Then I played with the lock and yelled some more, but I couldn't see anything or hear anything except the wheezing hum of the refrigerator. Its silence was the only way I could tell when the electricity went off, which it did at least four times during the night. After awhile I hunched against the corner of the cage and tried to sleep.

As soon as it was light, I took off my clothes and checked myself all over for honeycombs. I couldn't see any. I pulled my pants and shoes back on, scribbled a message on a page of my notebook and started banging on the cage again. The bey came in. She had a tray. It had a hard chunk of local bread, a harder one of cheese, and a bottle of Coke with a glass straw in it. It better not be the same one Evelyn had been drinking out of.

"Who else is here?" I asked the bey, but she looked skittish. I had really scared her last night.

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I smiled at her. "You remember me, don't you? I gave you a mirror." She didn't smile back. "Are there other beys here?"

She set the tray down on a carton and poked the bread through at me a chunk at a time. "What other beys are here besides you?" I said.

She couldn't get the Coke bottle through the wire without its spilling all over. After a minute or two of her trying, I said, "Here, look, let's cooperate," and I leaned forward and sucked on the straw while she held the bottle.

When I straightened up, she said, "Only me. No beys. Only me."

"Look," I said. "I want you to take a message to Lacau."

She didn't answer, but at least she didn't back away. I pulled out my trusty holo-lettered pen and held it close to my body. I wasn't going to make the same mistake as last night. "I'll give you pen if you take message to Lacau."

She backed away and stood pressed against the refrigerator, her large black eyes fastened on the pen. I scribbled Lacau's name on the message with it, and put it back in my pocket, and her eyes followed it, fascinated. "I gave you mirror," I said. "I give you this." She darted forward to take the message I was holding out to her, and I finished my breakfast and took a nap and wondered what had happened to the message I had given the Sandalman's bey.

When I woke up again, it was fully light, and I could see a lot of things I'd missed last night. My burn equipment was still here, on the other side of the sleeping bags, but I couldn't see the translator anywhere. One of the packing crates, a little one, was right outside the cage. I wriggled my hand through a square of wire and pulled the box in close enough to pull the masking tape off. I wondered who had packed the treasure. Howard's team? Or had they started dropping like flies as soon as they found it? The crate looked like too good a job for the suhundulim to have done it. It looked almost like Lacau's style, but why would he pack it? His job was just to keep it from being stolen.

Masking tape and padded mesh and bubbles, all very neat. I pushed my hand through the wire till it stuck, tipped the box a little forward with my other hand, and was able to get a grip on something. I pulled it out.

It was a vase of some kind. I was holding it by the long, narrow neck. In it was a silver tube that was supposed to look like a flower, a lily maybe, widening out and then narrowing toward the open top. The sides of the tube were etched with fine lines. The vase itself was made of some kind of blue ceramic, as thin as eggshell. I wrapped it up in plastic mesh and laid it back in the box. I rummaged in the bubbles some more and came up with something that looked like a cross between one of Lisii's

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clay pots and something a bey had chewed on for awhile and then spit out.

"That's the door seal," Lacau said. "According to Borchardt, it says, 'Beware the curse of kings and keepers that turn men's dreams to blood.' " He took the clay tablet out of my hands.

"Did you get my message?" I said, trying to pull my hands back through the cage wire. I scraped my wrist. It started to bleed. "Well," I said, "did you get the message?"

He threw a chewed wad of paper at me. "More or less," he said. "Beys tend to be curious about anything you give them. What was in the message?"

"I want to make a deal with you."

Lacau started to put the door seal back in the carton. "I already know how to work the translator," he said. "And the burn equipment."

"Nobody knows I'm here. I've been relaying stories back to Lisii ground-to-ground for burning."

"What kind of stories?" he said. He had straightened up, still holding the door seal.

"Fillers. The local wildlife, old interviews, the Commission. Human interest stuff."

"The Commission?" he said. He had made a sudden, lurching movement as if he had almost dropped the door seal and then caught it at the last instant. I wondered if he was okay. He looked terrible.

"I've got a relay set up back in Lisii. My transmissions go out through it, and Bradstreet thinks I'm still in Lisii. If I stop burning stories, he'll know something's up. He's got a Swallow. He could be here as soon as tomorrow."

Lacau put the vase carefully in the carton and piled bubbles around it. He taped it shut and put down the masking tape. "What's your deal?"

"I start filing stories again that will convince Bradstreet I'm still in Lisii."

"And in return?"

"You tell me what's going on. You let me interview the team. You give me a scoop."

"Can you keep him away till day after tomorrow?"

"What happens tomorrow?"

"Can you?"

"Yes."

He thought about it. "The ship will be here tomorrow morning," he said slowly. "I'm going to need help loading the treasure."

"I'll help you," I said.

"No private interviews, no private access to the burn equipment. I get censorship of the stories you file."

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"Okay," I said.

"You don't file the story on this till we're off Colchis."

I would have agreed to anything. This was not just a local bit of nastiness, minor potentate poisons a few strangers. There was a story here like no story I had ever had, and I would have agreed to kiss the Sandalman's snaky feet to get it.

"Deal," I said.

Lacau took a deep breath. "We found a treasure in the Spine," he said. "Three weeks ago. A princess's tomb. It's worth . . . I don't know. Most of the artifacts are made of silver, and their archaeological value alone is beyond price.

"A week ago, two days after we'd finished clearing the tomb and bringing it down here where we could work on it, the team came down with . . . something. A virus of some kind. Just the team. Not the Sandalman's representative, not the bearers who brought the stuff down from the Spine. Nobody but the team. The Sandalman claims they opened the tomb themselves without waiting for local authorization." He stopped.

"And if they did, that would mean they forfeit and the Sandalman gets the whole thing. Convenient. Where was the Sandalman's rep while they were supposedly doing all this?"

"It was his bey. She went back to get the Sandalman. The team stayed behind to guard the treasure. Howard swears, swore they didn't go in, that they waited until the Sandalman and his bearers got there. He says, said the team was poisoned."

"Poy son," Evelyn had said. "Sandalman."

"The Sandalman claims it was some kind of guard poison put in the tomb by the ancients, that the team touched it when they opened the tomb illegally."

"Who did Howard say poisoned them?" I said.

"He didn't. The . . . this thing they caught went into their throats. Howard couldn't talk at all after the first day. Evelyn Herbert is still able to talk, but she's very hard to understand. That's why I need the translator. I need to talk to Evelyn and find out how they were poisoned."

I thought about what he had said. Some kind of guard poison in the tomb. I knew about that. I had burned stories about the poisons the ancients of all cultures put in their tombs to keep defilers from ransacking them, the contact poisons they put on the artifacts themselves. I had handled the door seal.

Lacau was watching me. He said, "I helped bring the treasure down from the Spine. So did the bearers. And I've been handling the bodies. I've been wearing plasticgloves, but that wouldn't protect me from airborne or droplet infection. Whatever it is, I don't think it's contagious."

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"Do you think it's a poison, like Howard said?" I asked.

"My official position is that it's a virus that was present in the tomb and that the entire party, including the Sandalman's representative, was exposed to it when the tomb was opened."

"And the Sandalman."

"The Sandalman's bey entered the tomb before he did. Then the team. Then the Sandlaman. My official position is that the virus was an erobic and that after the tomb had been open to the air a few minutes, it was no longer virulent."

"But you don't believe that?"

"No."

"Then why take that position? Why not accuse the Sandalman? If the treasure's what you want, that'll make sure you get it. The Commission . . ."

"The Commission will close the planet and investigate the charges."

"And you don't want that?"

I wanted to ask why not, but I figured I'd better be out of the cage before I asked that. "But if it's a virus, what's your excuse for why the bey hasn't come down with it?" I said.

"Difference in body chemistry and size. I declared the quarantine, and the Sandalman went along with it, more or less. He agreed to give us an extension of a week to allow for the variation in incubation time of the virus in the bey before he files his complaint with the Commission. The week's up day after tomorrow. If the bey comes down with it in the next two days . . ."

Which explained why the Sandalman's bey was here, in quarantine with the archaeologists, when no one else, not even the Sandalman's guards, would set foot inside the tent. She was not Evelyn's nurse. She was the sole hope of the expedition.

And she was not going to catch anything. The Sandalman had agreed to the extension. He had been willing to leave her with the team. He would never have done that if he had thought there was even the slightest chance of her coming down with it. So there was not any chance. Unless Evelyn knew what the poison was. Unless she had threatened to poison the Sandalman's bey. Unless that was what was in the message.

"Why didn't he just kill the team right there in the tomb?" I said. "If all he wants is the treasure, why didn't he see to it they were buried by a rockfall or something and call it an accident?"

"There'd still have been an investigation. He couldn't risk that."

I was about to ask why he couldn't, but I'd thought of something more important. "Where is he anyway?"

"He's gone north to Khamsin to get an army," he said.

Khamsin. So the Sandalman wasn't at the compound after all, and the

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bey was probably making a nice meal of Evelyn's message by now. And when he arrived in Khamsin nothing I could say would convince Bradstreet something wasn't going on. I wondered if Lacau had figured that out yet.

He unlocked the cage. "I'm taking you to see Evelyn Herbert," he said. "But I want you to file a story first."

"Okay," I said. I had already decided what I was going to send. I wasn't going to be able to fool Bradstreet, but maybe I could throw him off just long enough for me to get my scoop.

"I want a printout first," Lacau said.

"This burner doesn't use one," I said, "but you can put the message on hold and then delete whatever you want from the monitor before we burn it." I pointed to the hold button.

"All right," he said.

"I put it in lock," I said, but he kept his hand on the hold key through the whole message.

I typed in a private priority that read, "Big Doings at the Spine. Hold 12-column."

"You're trying to get him out to the Spine?" Lacau said. "That won't work. He'll see the dome. Anyway, he can't uncook an official message, can he?"

"Of course he can. How do you think I knew you had a ship coming in? But he also knows that I know he can and he won't trust this message. This is the one he'll believe." I tapped the code for ground transmission, fed in the message, and waited for the burner to tell me it wouldn't go through. It couldn't do that until Lacau let go of the hold key, and I didn't even have to ask him. He raised his hand and put it over his chin and watched the screen.

I waited the length of time it would have taken me to weigh odds that Bradstreet would ignore a local message if it weren't flagged with a priority and then decide to send it straight. "Coming back as fast as I can. Stall," I typed. I signed it, "Jackie."

"Who's this message going to?" Lacau said.

"Nobody. I've got a relay set up in my tent. It'll put the message in store and hold it. I'll file a story in the morning about the Spine. It'll be transmitted from here, which is a day's trip from the Spine."

"So he'll think you're doing just what you said. Heading for Lisii."

"Yes," I said. "Now do I get to see Evelyn Herbert?"

"Yes," he said, and started back along the maze of boxes and electrical cords with me following. Halfway there he stopped and said, as if he had just remembered, "This . . . thing they've come down with is pretty bad. They look . . . I want you to be prepared," he said.

"I'm a reporter," I said, so that if I didn't look horrified enough Lacau

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would think it was because I was used to seeing horrors, but I made the speech for nothing. I didn't have any trouble registering shock. Evelyn looked just as bad the second time.

Lacau had put some kind of contraption across her chest. It was plugged into the spiderweb of cords overhead. I set up the translator. There wasn't much I could really do until Evelyn did a fix for us, but I fiddled with it anyway, and the bey watched me, all eyes. Lacau sprayed on plastic-gloves and went over to the hammock to look at her.

"I gave her her shot half an hour ago," he said. "It'll be a few more minutes."

"What are you giving her?" I said.

"Dilaudid and sulfadine morphates. It was all there was in the first aid kit. There were IV packs, but they kept leaking."

He said that without emotion, as if he had not had the horror of trying to put an IV in an arm that could cut an IV pack to ribbons. He did not seem at all afraid of her.

"The dilaudid puts her out cold for about an hour, and then after that she's pretty lucid, but in a lot of pain. The morphates are better for pain, but they put her under after only a couple of minutes."

"If it's going to be awhile, I'm going to show the bey the translator, okay?" I said. "If I take it apart and explain everything, we decrease our chances of finding it taken apart tomorrow morning. Is that all right?"

He nodded and went over to look at Evelyn again.

I pulled the face off the box, motioned the bey over, and started my spiel. Every burn chip, every hold strip, every circuit. I pulled them all out and let her handle them, hold them up to the light, stick them in her mouth, and finally put them back in the way they belonged with her own dirty little hands. Halfway through the electricity went off again, and we sat for five full minutes in twilight, but Lacau made no move to get up or to light the photosene lamp.

"It's the respirator," he said. "I've got one on Borchardt, too. It keeps overloading the generator." I wished the lights would come back on so I could see his face more clearly. I was more than ready to believe the generator could overload. The one out at Lisii was off half the time without benefit of respirators, but I was still sure he was lying. It was that double-door refrigerator next to my cage that was overloading the generator and making the lights go out. And what was in that refrigerator? Coca-Cola?

The lights came on. Lacau leaned over Evelyn, and the little bey and I snapped the last burn chip in place and put the face back on the translator. I gave the bey a burned-out hold strip to keep, and she went off in a corner to examine it.

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Lacau said, "Evelyn?" and she murmured something.

"I think we're about ready," he said. "What do you want her to say?"

I handed him a clip mike to fasten on the plastic drape above her head. "Refrigerator," I said, and knew I'd gone too far. I was liable to find myself back in the cage. "Have her say anything you want so I can get a fix. Her name. Anything."

"Evie," he said, and his voice was surprisingly gentle. "We have a machine here that can help you talk. I want you to say your name."

She said something, but the box didn't pick it up. "The mike's not close enough," I said.

Lacau pulled the plastic drape down a little, and she made a sound again, and this time it came out of the box as static. I twiddled dials to get an initial sound, but couldn't get it to match.

"Have her try it again. I'm not getting anything," I said, and punched hold so I could hang onto the sound and work with it, but it was still noise, no matter what I did. I began to wonder if the bey had put one of the tubes in backwards.

"Can you try it again?" Lacau said gently. "Evelyn?" and this time he bent so far over her he was practically touching her. Noise.

"There's something the matter with the box," I said.

"She's not saying, 'Evelyn,' " Lacau said.

"What's she saying then?"

Lacau straightened up and looked at me. "Message," he said.

The lights went out again, just for a few seconds, and while they were out I said, trying to sound a little impatient and not at all nervous, "Okay, then, I'll get a fix on 'message.' Have her say it again."

The lights came back on, and then the centering lights on the translator blinked on, and her voice, sounding like a woman's voice now, said, "Message," and then, "Something to tell you."

There was a deadly silence. I was surprised the box wasn't picking up my heartbeat and making it into the word "caught." The lights went out again and stayed out. Evelyn started wheezing. The wheezing got rapidly worse.

"Can't you switch the respirator onto batteries?" I said.

"No," Lacau said. "I'll have to get the other one." He pulled out a sticklight and used it to light the photosene lamp. He picked the lamp up by its base and went out.

As soon as I couldn't see the wavering shadows along the hall of boxes anymore, I felt my way over to the bed. I nearly tripped over the bey, who was sitting cross-legged by the bed, sucking on the hold strip. "Get water," I said.

"Evelyn," I said, using the sound she was making to tell me where she was. "Evelyn, it's me. Jack. I was here before."

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The wheezing stopped, just like that, as if she were holding her breath.

"I gave the message to the Sandalman," I said. "I handed it to him myself."

She said something, but I was too far away from the translator to pick it up. It sounded like "light."

"I went right away. As soon as I left you last night."

This time I made out the word. "Good," she said, and the lights went on.

"What was in the message, Evelyn?"

"What message?" Lacau said.

He set the respirator down beside the bed. I could see why he hadn't wanted to use it. It was the kind that fastened over the trachea and cut off all speech.

"What were you trying to say, Evie?" he said.

"Message," she said. "Sandalman. Good."

"She's not making any sense," I said. "Is she still under the morphates? Ask her something you know the answer to."

"Evelyn," he said. "Who was with you out on the Spine?"

"Howard. Callender. Borchardt." She stopped a minute as if she were trying to remember. "Bey."

"That's fine. You don't have to tell me the others. When you found the treasure, what did you do?".

"Waited. Sent bey. Waited Sandalman."

"Did you go in the tomb?" He had been over these questions before. I could tell by the way he asked them, but on the last question his tone changed, and I waited to hear her answer, too.

"No," she said, and the word came through absolutely clearly. "Waited Sandalman."

"What were you trying to tell me, Evelyn? Yesterday. You kept trying to tell me something, and I couldn't understand you. But now I've got a translator. What were you trying to tell me?"

What would she say to him? Never mind? I got somebody else to deliver it? It crossed my mind, then and later, that she could not tell us apart, that her ears were filled with honeycombs, too, and our voices bending over her sounded the same to her. That wasn't true, of course. She knew exactly who she was talking to until the very last. But right then I held my breath, my hand hovering over the switch, thinking that if I waited she might tell Lacau I'd been in here before. Thinking, too, that if I waited she would tell me what was in the message.

"Were you trying to tell me about the poison, Evelyn?"

"Too late," she said.

Lacau turned around. "I didn't catch that," he said. "What did she say?"

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"I think she said, 'treasure.' "

"Treasure," she said. "Curse." Her breathing steadied. The translator stopped picking it up. Lacau stood up and let the drape down over her.

"She's asleep," he said. "She never lasts long on the morphates." He turned around and looked at me. The bey had been waiting for herchance. She grabbed the Coke bottle off the cargo carton and ducked past him. He turned and looked at her.

"Maybe she's right," he said tonelessly. "Maybe it is a curse."

I was watching the bey, too, as she stood there waiting for Evelyn to wake up so she could give her a drink, no taller than a ten-year-old, clutching the Coke bottle in one hand and the hold strip I had given her in the other. I tried to think what she would look like when the poison started working on her.

"I think sometimes I could almost do it," Lacau said.

"Do what?" I said.

"I think I could poison the Sandalman's bey to save the treasure if I knew what the poison was. That's a kind of curse, isn't it, wanting something so badly you'd kill somebody for it?"

"Yes," I said. The bey stuck the hold strip in her mouth.

"Ever since I saw the treasure, I . . ."

I stood up. "You'd kill a harmless bey for a goddamned blue vase?" I said angrily. "When you'll get the treasure anyway? You can take blood samples. You can prove the team was poisoned. The Commission will award you the treasure."

"The Commission will close the planet."

"What difference will that make?"

"They will destroy the treasure," Lacau said, as if he'd forgotten I was there.

"What are you talking about? They won't let the Sandalman or his cronies anywhere near the treasure. They'll see to it nobody damages the merchandise. They'll take their own sweet time about it, but you'll get your treasure."

"You haven't seen the treasure," he said. "You . . ." He put up his hands in a gesture of despair. "You don't understand."

"Then maybe you'd better show me this wonderful treasure," I said.

His shoulders slumped. "All right," he said, and everything in me said Story.

He locked me in the cage again while he hooked the respirator back up to Borchardt. I didn't ask to go with him. I had known Borchardt almost as long as I had Howard, although I hadn't liked him as well. But I wouldn't have wished this on him. It was nearly noon. The sun was practically overhead and hot enough to burn a hole right through the plastic. Lacau came back in half an hour, looking worse than ever.

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He sat down on a packing crate and put his hands up to his head. "Borchardt's dead," he said. "He died while we were in with Evelyn."

"Let me out of the cage," I said.

"Borchardt had a theory about the beys," Lacau said. "About their curiosity. He looked on it as a curse."

"Curse," Evelyn's bey had said, huddled against the wall.

"Let me out of the cage," I said.

"He thought that when the suhundulim came the beys were curious about them and the 'snakes underneath,' so curious they let them stay. And the suhundulim enslaved them. Borchardt maintained the beys were a great people with a highly developed civilization until the suhundulim came and took Colchis away from them."

"Let me out of the cage, Lacau."

He bent over and dug down into the packing case beside him. "This could never have been made by a suhundulim," he said, and pulled it out, spilling plastic bubbles everywhere. "It's spun silver strung with ceramic beads so tiny you can't see them except under a microscope. No suhundulim could make that."

"No," I said. It did not look like beads strung on a silver wire. It looked like a cloud, a majestic desert thunderhead. When Lacau turned it in the light coming through the plastic roof, it shaded into rose and lavender. It was beautiful.

"A suhundulim could make this, however," he said, and turned it around so I could see the other side. It was mashed flat, a dull gray mass. "One of the Sandalman's bearers dropped it bringing it out of the tomb."

He laid it carefully back in its nest of plastic bubbles and taped the box shut. He walked over and stood in front of the cage. "They will close the planet," he said. "Even if we could keep it out of the Sandalman's hands, the Commission will take a year, two years, to make a decision, maybe longer."

"Let me out," I said.

He turned and opened the double doors of the refrigerator and stepped back so I could see what was inside. "The electricity goes off all the time. Sometimes it stays off for days," he said.

From the moment I had intercepted Lacau's message, I had known it was the story of the century. I had felt it in my bones. And here it was.

It was a statue of a girl. A child, twelve maybe. No older than that. She sat on a block of solid beaten silver. She was wearing a white and blue dress with trailing fringes, and she was leaning against the side wall of the refrigerator, her hand and forearm flat against it and her head leaning on her hand, as if she were overcome by some great grief. I couldn't see her face.

Her black hair was bound in the same silver stuff the cloud had been

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made of, and around her neck was a collar of the blue faience etched in silver. One knee was slightly forward, and I could see her foot in a silver shoe. She was made of wax, as soft and white as skin, and I knew that if she could somehow turn her sorrowing face and look at me, it would be the face I had waited all my life to see. I clutched the wire of the cage and could not get my breath.

"The beys' civilization was very advanced," Lacau said. "Arts, science, embalming." He smiled at my uncomprehending frown. "She's not a statue. She's a bey princess.

"The embalming process turned the tissues to wax." He leaned over her. "The tomb was in a cave that was naturally refrigerated, but we had to bring her down from the Spine. Howard sent me back to try to find temp control equipment and coolants. This was all I could find. It was out at the bottling plant," Lacau said, and lifted the blue-and-white fringe of her trailing skirt. "We didn't try to move her till the last day. The Sandalman's bearers bumped her against the door of the tomb getting her out," he said.

The wax of her leg was flattened and pushed up. Nearly half of the black femur was exposed.

No wonder Evelyn's first word to me had been, "Hurry." No wonder Lacau had laughed when I told him the Commission would keep the treasure safe. The investigation would take a year or more, and she would sit here with the electricity flickering on and off.

"We have to get her off the planet," I said, and my hands clutched the mesh so hard the wire cut nearly through to the bone.

"Yes," Lacau said, in a tone that told me what I should have known.

"The Sandalman won't let her off Colchis," I said. "He's afraid the Commission will try to take the planet away from him." And I had burned a story about the Commission to scare him. "They won't do anything. They're not going to give Colchis to a bunch of ten-year-olds who keep sticking things in their mouths, no matter who was here first."

"I know," Lacau said.

"He poisoned the team," I said, and turned to look at the princess, her beautiful face that I could not see turned to the wall in some ancient grief. He had killed the team, and when he got back from the north with his army he would kill us. And destroy the princess. "Where's your burn equipment?" I said.

"The Sandalman has it."

"Then he knows when the ship will be here. We've got to get her out of here."

"Yes," Lacau said. He let go of the blue-and-white fringe, and it fell across her foot. He shut the door of the refrigerator.

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"Let me out of the cage," I said. "I'll help you. Whatever you're going to do, I'll help you."

He looked at me a long minute, as if he were trying to decide whether he could trust me. "I'll let you out," he said finally. "But not yet."

It was dark again before he came to get me. He had come through the center area twice. The first time he got a shovel from the jumble of equipment stacked against the cargo cartons. The second time he opened the refrigerator again to get out an injection kit for Evelyn's shot, and I stood in the cage and stared at the princess, waiting for her to turn her head. Sitting there afterwards, waiting for Lacau to finish doing whatever it was he did not trust me to help him with, I was surprised to see that the wire of the cage had not mashed and flattened my hands like tallow.

It had been dark over an hour when Lacau came and let me out. He had a coil of yellow extension cords with him, and the shovel. He leaned it against the pile of flattened cartons, dumped the cords on the floor beside it, and unlocked the cage.

"We have to move the refrigerator," he said. "We'll put it against the back wall of the tent so we can load it into the ship as soon as it lands."

I went over to the heap of cords and began to untangle them. I didn't ask him where he'd gotten them. One of them looked like the cord to Evelyn's respirator. We plugged the cords together, and then Lacau unplugged the refrigerator. My grip on the cord tightened as he did it, even though I knew he was going to plug it into the extension cord and hook it up again and the whole process wasn't going to take more than thirty seconds. He plugged it in carefully, as if he were afraid the lights would go off when he did it, but they didn't even flicker.

They dimmed a little when we picked the refrigerator up between us, but it weighed less than I thought it would. As soon as we shuffled past the first row of packing crates, I saw what Lacau had been doing at least part of the day. He'd moved as many boxes as he could to the east side of the tent and up against the wall, leaving a passage wide enough for us to get through with the refrigerator and a space for it against the wall of the tent. He'd hooked a light up, too. The extension cord didn't quite reach, and we had to set the refrigerator down a few meters from the wall of the tent. It was still close enough. If the ship got here in time.

"Is the Sandalman here yet?" I said. Lacau was walking rapidly back to the center area, and I wasn't at all sure I should follow him. I wasn't going to let myself be locked in that cage for the Sandalman's soldiers to find. I stayed where I was.

"Do you have a recorder?" Lacau said. He stopped and looked at me. "Do you have a recorder?"

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"No," I said.

"I want you to record Evelyn's testimony," he said. "We'll need it if the Commission is called in."

"I don't have a recorder," I said.

"I won't lock you in again," he said. He reached in his pocket and tossed me something. It was the handlock to the cage. "If you don't trust me, you can give it to Evelyn's bey."

"There's a record button on the translator," I said.

And we went in and interviewed Evelyn and she told me there was a curse and I didn't believe her. And the Sandalman came.

Lacau seemed unconcerned that the Sandalman was camped on the ridge above us. "I've unscrewed all the light bulbs," he said, "and they can't see into this room. I put a tarp on the roof this afternoon." He sat back down next to Evelyn. "They have lanterns, but they won't try coming down that ridge at night."

"What happens when the sun comes up?" I said.

"I think she's coming around," he said. "Turn the recorder on. Evelyn, we've got a recorder here. We need you to tell us what happened. Can you talk?"

"Last day," Evelyn said.

"Yes," Lacau said. "This is the last day. The ship will be here in the morning to take us home. We'll get you to a doctor."

"Last day," she said again. "In tomb. Loading princess. Cold."

"What was that last word?" Lacau said.

"It sounded like, 'cold,' " I said.

"It was cold in the tomb, wasn't it, Evie? Is that what you mean?"

She tried to shake her head. "Coke," she said. "Sandalman. Here. Must be thirsty. Coke."

"The Sandalman gave you a Coke? Was the poison in the Coke? Is that how he poisoned the team?"

"Yes," she said, and it came out like a sigh, as if that was what she had been trying to tell us all along.

"What kind of poison was it, Evelyn?"

"Blue."

Lacau jerked around to look at me. "Did she say, 'blood'?"

I shook my head. "Ask her again," I said.

"Blood," Evelyn said clearly. "Keep her."

"What's she talking about?" I said. "A kheper bite can't kill you. It doesn't even make you sick."

"No," Lacau said, "but enough kheper poison could. I should have seen the similarities, the replacement of the cell structure, the waxiness. The ancient beys used a concentrated distillation of kheper-infected blood for

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embalming. 'Beware the curse of kings and khepers.' How do you suppose the Sandalman figured it out?"

Maybe he hadn't had to, I thought. Maybe he'd had the poison all along. Maybe his ancestors, landing on Colchis, had been as curious as the beys they were going to steal a planet from. "Show us how your embalming process works," they might have said, and then, when they'd seen the obvious benefits, they'd said to the smartest of the beys, just like the Sandalman had said to Howard and Evelyn and the rest of the team, "Here. Have a Coke. You must be thirsty."

I thought of the beautiful princess, leaning against her hand. And Evelyn. And Evelyn's bey, sitting in front of the photosene flame, all unaware.

"Is it contagious?" I said for the last time. "Would Evelyn's blood be poisonous, too?"

Lacau blinked at me as if he could not make out what I was saying. "Only if you drank it, I think," he said after a minute. He looked down at Evelyn. "She was asking me to poison the bey," he said. "But I couldn't understand her. It was before you got here with the translator."

"You'd have done it, wouldn't you?" I said. "If you'd known what the poison was, that her blood was poisonous, you'd have killed the bey to save the treasure?"

He wasn't listening to me. He was looking up at the roof of the tent where the tarp didn't quite cover. "Is it getting light?" he said.

"Not for another hour," I said.

"No," he said, "I would have done almost anything for her." His voice was so full of longing it embarrassed me to listen to him. "But not that."

He gave Evelyn a second shot and blew out the lamp. After a few minutes he said, "There are three injection kits left. In the morning I'm going to give Evelyn all of them." I wondered if he was looking at me the way he had when I was in the cage, wondering if he could trust me to do what had to be done.

"Will it kill her?" I said.

"I hope so," he said. "There's no way we can move her."

"I know," I said, and we sat in the darkness for a long time.

"Two days," he said, and his voice was full of that same longing. "The incubation period was only two days."

And then we sat there not saying anything, waiting for the sun to come up.

When it did, Lacau took me into what had been Howard's room, where he had cut a flap-like window in the plastic wall that faced the ridge, and I saw what he had done. The Sandalman's soldiers lined the top of the ridge. They were too far away to be able to see the snakes rippling

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across their faces, but I knew they were looking down at the dome, and on the sand in front of us, laid end to end, were the bodies.

"How long have they been there?" I said.

"I put them out there yesterday afternoon. After Borchardt died."

"You dug Howard up?" I said. Howard was lying nearest us. He did not look as bad as I had imagined he would. He had almost no honeycombs, and although his skin looked waxy and soft like the skin over Evelyn's cheekbones, he looked almost like I remembered him. The sun had done that. He was melting out there in the sun.

"Yes," he said. "The Sandalman knows it's a poison, but the rest of the suhundulim don't. They'll never cross that line of bodies. They're afraid of catching the virus."

"He'll tell them," I said.

"Would you believe him?" he said. "Would you cross that line because he told you it wasn't a virus?"

"It's a good thing you left me in the cage," I said. "I wouldn't have helped you do this."

Light flashed from the ridge. "Are they firing at us?" I said.

"No," he said. "The Sandalman's head bey has something shiny in her hand that's reflecting the sunlight."

It was the bey from the compound. She had my press card and was moving it back and forth so it flashed sunlight.

"She wasn't there before," Lacau said. "The Sandalman must have brought her out to show his soldiers she hasn't caught the virus and they won't either."

"What?" I said. "Why would she catch it? I thought Evelyn's bey was the one who was with the team."

He was frowning at me. "Evelyn's bey never went anywhere near the Spine. She's a maidservant the Sandalman gave Evelyn. How did you get the idea she was the Sandalman's representative?" He looked at me in disbelief. "You don't think the Sandalman would let us anywhere near his bey after we'd negotiated for the extra days, do you? He wouldn't have trusted us not to poison her like he poisoned the team. He locked her up tight in his compound before he went north," he said bitterly.

"And Evelyn knew that," I said. "She knew the Sandalman had gone north. She knew he'd left his bey behind. Didn't she?"

Lacau didn't answer. He was watching the bey. The Sandalman offered her something, and she took it. It looked like a bucket. She had to stick the press card in her mouth to free both hands so she could lift it. The Sandalman said something to her, and she started down the ridge, spilling liquid from the bucket as she went. The Sandalman had left his bey behind at the compound, locked up, but the guards had run off like the guards at the dome, and a curious bey could open any lock.

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"She doesn't seem to be sick, does she?" Lacau said bitterly. "And our week is up. The team caught it in two days."

"Two," I said. "Did Evelyn know the Sandalman left his bey behind?"

"Yes," Lacau said, watching the ridge. "I told her."

The little bey was down the ridge and onto the plain. The Sandalman yelled something at her, and she began to run. The bucket banged against her legs, and more liquid spilled out. As soon as she reached the line of bodies, she stopped and looked back at the ridge. The Sandalman yelled again. He was a long way away, but the ridge amplified his voice. I could hear him quite clearly.

"Pour," he said. "Pour fire," and the little bey tipped the bucket and started down the row.

"Photosene," Lacau said tonelessly. "The sunlight will ignite it."

A lot had spilled out of the bucket on the way down, none of it on the bey, for which I was thankful. There were only a few drops left to shake over Howard. The bey dropped the bucket and danced back. At the other end of the row, Callender's shirt took fire. I shut my eyes.

"Two lousy days," Lacau said. Callender's mustache was on fire. Borchardt smouldered and then flared up yellowly like a candle. Lacau didn't even see me leave.

I followed the electrical cords back to Evelyn's room, half-running. The bey wasn't there. I flipped on the translator and yanked the drape up and looked down at her. "What was in the message, Evelyn?" I said.

The sound of her breathing was so loud nothing was going to get through on the translator. Her eyes were closed.

"You knew the Sandalman had already gone north when you sent me back to the compound, didn't you?" The translator was picking up my own voice and echoing it back to me. "You knew I was lying when I told you I'd delivered the message to the Sandalman. But you didn't care. Because the message wasn't for him. It was for his bey."

She said something. The translator couldn't do anything with it, but it didn't matter. I knew what it was. "Yes," she said, and I felt a sudden desire to hit her, to watch the honeycombed cheeks cave in under the force of my hand and mash against bone.

"You knew she'd put it in her mouth, didn't you?"

"Yes," she said, and opened her eyes. There was a dull roaring outside.

"You murdered her," I said.

"Had to. To save the treasure," she said. "Sorry. Curse."

"There isn't any curse," I said, clenching my hands at my sides so I wouldn't hit her. "That was just a story you made up to stall me till the poison could take effect, wasn't it?"

She started to cough. The bey darted in front of me with the Coke

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bottle. She put the straw in Evelyn's mouth, propped Evelyn's head up with her hand, and tilted her gently forward so she could drink.

"You'd have killed your own bey, too, if you had to, wouldn't you?" I said. "For the treasure. For the goddamned treasure!"

"Curse," Evelyn said.

"The ship's here," Lacau said behind me, "but we'll never make it. Howard's the only one left. They're sending the bey down with more photosene."

"We'll make it," I said, and switched the translator off. I took out my knife and slit the wall of the tent behind Evelyn's hammock. Evelyn's bey scampered to her feet and came over to where we were standing. The Sandalman's bey was halfway across the plain with the bucket. She was moving more slowly this time, and none of the photosene was splashing out. Above, on the ridge, the Sandalman's soldiers edged forward.

"We can load the treasure," I said. "Evelyn's seen to that."

The bey made it to the bodies. She started to tip the bucket onto Howard, then seemed to change her mind, and set the bucket down. The Sandalman yelled something at her. She took hold of the bucket, let got of it again, and fell over.

"You see," I said. "It was a virus after all."

There was a sound from above her like a stuttering sigh, and the Sandalman's soldiers began to back away from the edge of the ridge.

A loading crew was there before we even had the back of the tent sliced open. Lacau pointed them at the nearest boxes, and they didn't even ask any questions. They just started carrying them out to the ship. Lacau and I picked up the refrigerator, gently, gently, so as not to bang the princess's shins, and carried her across the sand to the ship's loading bay.

The captain took one look at her and yelled for the rest of his crew to come and help load. "Hurry," he said after us. "They're bringing up some kind of weapon on the ridge there."

We hurried. We handed stuff out the back door, and the crew ran the boxes across the sand faster than Evelyn's bey getting a drink of water in a Coke bottle, and we still weren't fast enough. There was a soft whoosh and splat on the roof overhead, and liquid trickled down the plastic mesh over our heads.

"He's got a photosene cannon," Lacau said. "Is the blue vase out?"

"Where's Evelyn's bey?" I said, and took off for Evelyn's room. The mesh drape above the hammock was already melting, the fire slicing through it like a knife. The little bey was flattened against the inner wall where I had seen her that first night, watching the fire. I grabbed her up under my arm and dived for the center area.

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I couldn't get through. The packing cases that lined the tent were a wall of roaring flame. I ducked back into Evelyn's room. I saw immediately that we could not get out that way either, and just as immediately I remembered the slit I'd made in the wall.

I clamped my hand over the bey's mouth so she wouldn't breathe in the fumes from the melting plastic, held my breath, and started past the hammock.

Evelyn was still alive.

I could not hear her wheezing above the fire, but I could see her chest rise and fall before it began to melt. She was lying with her face pressed against the side of the melting hammock, and she turned her face toward me as I stopped as if she had heard me. The honeycombs on her face widened and flattened, and then smoothed out with the heat, and for a minute I saw her as she must have looked when Bradstreet saw her and said that she was beautiful, as she must have looked when the Sandalman gave her his own bey. The face she turned to me was the face that I had waited all my life to see. And only saw too late.

She guttered out like a candle, and I stood there and watched her, and by the time she was dead the roof had caved in on Lacau and two of the crew. And the blue vase had already been broken in a mad dash to the ship with the last of the treasure.

But we saved the princess. And I got my story.

It is the story of the century. At least that's what Bradstreet's boss called it when he fired him. My boss is asking for forty columns a day. I give them to him.

They are great stories. In them Evelyn is a beautiful victim and Lacau is a hero. I am a hero, too. After all, I helped save the treasure. The stories I burn don't tell how Lacau dug up Howard and built a fort with him or how I got the Lisii team killed. In the stories I burn there is only one villain.

I send forty columns a day out over the burner and try to put the blue vase back together and in what time is left I write this story, which I will not send anywhere. The bey fiddles with the lights.

Our cabin has a system of air-current-sensitive highlights that dim and brighten automatically as you move. The bey cannot get enough of them. She does not even mess with the blue vase or try to put the pieces in her mouth.

I have figured out what the vase is, by the way. The etched lines on the silver straw that looks like a lily are scratches. I am piecing together a ten-thousand-year-old Coke bottle. Here. You must be thirsty. The beys may have had a wonderful civilization, but years before the Sandalman's grandparents even showed up, they were busy poisoning princesses. They

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murdered her, and she must have known it, and that's why she leans her head against her hand so hopelessly. They murdered her for what? For a treasure? For a planet? For a story? And didn't anybody try to save her?

The first thing Evelyn said to me was, "Help me." What if I had? What if I had said the hell with the story and called Bradstreet, sent him over to get the Lisii team's doctor and evacuate the rest of the team? What if, while he was still on the way, I had burned a message to the Sandalman that said, "You can have the princess if you'll let us off the planet?" and then plugged in that trachea respirator that wouldn't let her talk but might have kept her alive till we could get her onto a ship?

I like to think that I would have done that if I had known her, if it had not been, as she said, "Too late." But I don't know. The Sandalman, who was so enamoured of her that he gave her his own bey, stood in the tomb and offered her poison in a Coke bottle. And Lacau knew her, but what he went back for, what he died for, was not her but a blue vase.

"There was a curse," I say.

Evelyn's bey drifts slowly across the room, and the lights brighten and then dim again as she passes. "All," she says, and sits down on the bunk. The reading light at the end of the bed goes on.

"What?" I say, and wish I still had the translator.

"Curse everybody," she says. "You. Me. All." She crosses her dirty-looking hands over her breast and lies down on the bed. The lights go out. It is just like old times.

In a minute she'll get tired of it being dark and get up, and I'll go back to labeling the jigsawed pieces of the blue vase so a team of archaeologists who have not yet been killed by the curse can put it back together. But for now I have to sit in the dark.

"Curse everybody." Even the Lisii team. Because of the relay in my tent, the Sandalman thought they were helping me get the treasure off Colchis. He buried them alive in the cave they were excavating. He couldn't kill Bradstreet because he was halfway to the Spine with a broken-down Swallow, and by the time he got it fixed the Commission had landed, and he'd been fired and my boss had hired him to file stories on the hearings. They have the Sandalman in custody in a geodome like the one he burned down. The rest of the suhundulim sit in on the Commission's hearings, but the beys, according to Bradstreet, don't pay any attention to them. They are more interested in the Commission's judicial wigs. They have stolen four of them so far.

Evelyn's bey gets up and then flops back down on the bunk, trying to make the highlights flicker. She is not at all curious about this story I am writing, this tale of murder and poison and other curses men fall victim to. Maybe her people got enough of that in the good old days.

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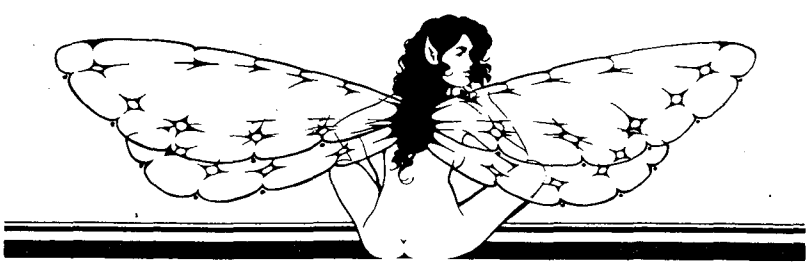
Maybe Borchardt was wrong and the suhundulim didn't take Colchis away from them at all. Maybe the minute they landed, the beys said, "Here. Take it. Hurry."

She has fallen asleep. I can hear her quiet, even breathing. She is not under the curse, at least.

I saved her, and I saved the princess, even though I was a thousand years too late. So maybe I am not entirely in its clutches either. But in a few minutes I will go turn on a light and finish this story, and when I'm done with it I'll put it in a nice, safe place. Like a tomb. Or a refrigerator.

Why? Because having gotten this story at such great cost I am determined to tell it? Or because the curse of kings stands all around me like a cage, hangs overhead like a tangle of electrical cords?

"The curse of kings and keepers," I say, and my bey scrambles off the bunk and tears out of the cabin to fetch me a drink of water in a Coke bottle she must have been carrying when I dragged her on board, as if I were her new patient and lay under a drape of plasticmesh, already dying. ●



NEXT ISSUE:

April's cover story, "How the Wind Spoke at Madaket," by Lucius Shepard is a terrifying tale of murderous winds rampaging over Nantucket Island. We'll also have a thought-provoking piece, "Time's Rub," by Gregory Benford, as well as stories by George Alec Effinger, Lee Killough, and others. Look for it at your local newsstand March 12, 1985.

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ON BOOKS

by Norman Spinrad

We Americans sometimes tend to think we invented modern science fiction, dating the birth of the genre from the first issue of Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories* in 1926, and in a certain sense this is true. Gernsback *did* coin the term "scientifiction" which soon enough metamorphosed into "science fiction"; *Amazing was* the first magazine dedicated entirely to SF; the basic parameters of commercial SF *did* evolve in the early American SF magazines; and the first full-time "science fiction writers" as such *did* come out of the American pulp tradition. So it might fairly be said that the science fiction *genre* was indeed an American invention.

The British, on the other hand, have generally been of another opinion, and have a certain justice on their side when they claim that modern science fiction as a *literature* has earlier roots on the other side of the Atlantic. In his history of science fiction, *Billion Year Spree,* Brian Aldiss makes a good case for the notion that modern SF evolved out of the original 18th and 19th century gothic, and that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was the first true science fiction novel in the modern sense. Published in 1818, more than a century before the first issue of *Amazing, Frankenstein* is certainly a true science fiction novel by any reasonable literary definition, even if it did take another century and then some for the name to be coined. In a trivial sense, it originated such staples of SF iconography as the mad scientist and the android, and in a far deeper sense was perhaps the first novel of any sort to have the emerging moral and spiritual dialectic between the then-nascent scientific worldview and theocratic humanism at its thematic core.

And if the case for *Frankenstein* as the first true science fiction novel may be at least arguable, the case for H.G. Wells as a thoroughly modern science fiction writer working in the close of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries certainly is not. Time travel, invasion from Mars, invisibility, war in the air, mutation, and so forth—half the material of mid-20th century SF can be found in such Wellsian works as *The War of the Worlds, The Time Machine,*

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The Island of Dr. Moreau, The Food of the Gods, and dozens more.

Indeed much of Wells looks like quite modern science fiction even from a post-World War II perspective, for rather than using SF elements as backdrop for scientific romances or "action adventure stories" in the manner of most pre-World War II American SF, science fiction for Wells was a vehicle for exploring social, political, economic, and philosophical concerns, and he would have been quite at home in the pages of Anthony Boucher's *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction,* or in H.L. Gold's *Galaxy* in the company of Pohl, Kornbluth, Budrys, Knight, Leiber, and the other writers of the post-war American SF renaissance, who, consciously or not, owed a great deal to his pioneering work, much of which still seems quite contemporary even today.

Then, too, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* appeared in 1932, only six years after the first issue of the first true science fiction magazine and apparently entirely uninfluenced by American science fiction, Olaf Stapledon began producing his major work at about the time John W. Campbell was beginning his work at *Astounding,* and C.S. Lewis had begun to write a very different sort of SF well before 1940.

The point of all this being that while the modern SF *genre* was more or less evolved in the United States between about 1926 and 1940, modern science fiction as a *total literature* is a quite thoroughly Anglo-American production, with literary roots in Britain that pre-date American "scientifiction" by half a century and more.

And in the post–1945 period, these two strains of Anglophone science fiction seemed to have quite thoroughly cross-bred to produce a vigorous hybrid that, despite certain exceptions like Kafka, Kapek, Lem, and the Strugatsky brothers, has established a dominance, literary and commercial, not only in the English-speaking world, but throughout Western Europe, and to a lesser extent Japan.

Lately, however, say in the past decade or less, almost unnoticed on this side of the Atlantic, but growing more and more to dominate the perceptions of British writers, editors, and critics, a rift seems to have been opening up between the British and American wings of Anglophone science fiction which threatens the commercial viability of British science fiction on the one hand and the literary vigor of American science fiction on the other, and which needs to be addressed more openly and with less narrow chauvinism on both sides of the Atlantic.

In the 1950s, throughout the 1960s, and perhaps well into the 1970s, it seemed as if Anglophone science fiction had become an irrevocably transatlantic literature. Most of the significant American works were readily published in Britain, and most of the major Brit-

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ish science fiction writers were able to place most of their major works with American publishers. Indeed, in America, writers like John Brunner, Brian Aldiss, John Wyndham, Michael Moorcock, D.G. Compton, Keith Roberts, E.C. Tubb, John Christopher, and a good many others, were scarcely perceived as British at all. They were science fiction writers, they wrote in English, their works did not require translation, they competed for American publication on a more or less equal basis with American writers, and in literary terms, there was little perceived difference between "American" and "British" science fiction. If this was not exactly utopia, there was at least a strong feeling of community among SF writers and editors on both sides of the Atlantic, and a sense of mutual readership.

Paradoxically enough, the first cracks in this transnational edifice can in retrospect be seen to have appeared just when the creative synergy between the British and American wings of Anglophone SF had reached its zenith.

While the "New Wave" phenomenon of the 1960s and early 1970s certainly created strong polarizations within the transatlantic SF community, none of these were along national lines, or so it seemed at the time, at least.

Certainly one could not imagine a more thoroughly Anglo-American cast of characters. The two most influential editors in this transformation of science fiction were the Briton, Michael Moorcock, who started the whole thing when he took over editorship of the British SF magazine *New Worlds*, and the American, Harlan Ellison, who proclaimed the US branch of the movement with the publication of his *Dangerous Visions* anthology by Doubleday, an American publisher. Writers who either proclaimed their allegiance to this movement or were dubbed, sometimes against their wishes, "New Wave writers" included such Americans as Samuel R. Delany, Roger Zelazny, Ellison, and Barry Malzberg, and such Britons as Moorcock, Aldiss, and preeminantly and centrally, J.G. Ballard. Nor was the opposite camp of the traditionalists wholly American, for such non-Americans as E.C. Tubb, A. Bertram Chandler, and even to some extent John Brunner, were considered mainstays of the "good old stuff" for better or worse on both sides of the Atlantic.

And indeed some of the central works of "New Wave science fiction" could scarcely be said to have a national identity at all. *New Worlds* was the first publisher of most of the short stories of John Sladek and James Sallis, Americans residing during this period in London. Thomas M. Disch and I both lived in Britain during part of this period, and both of our novels, *Camp Concentration* and *Bug Jack Barron*, saw their first publication anywhere as serials in *New Worlds* and their first appearance in book form in the United States.

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Appropriately enough it was Judith Merril, an American writer, critic, and anthologist living in Britain at the time, who first coined the term "New Wave" to describe what was then an entirely British phenomenon, and then brought it to the attention of Americans in anthologies originated in the United States.

The advocates of the New Wave saw the dichotomy in the SF of the day not as a difference in national styles but as a difference between the traditional SF written on both sides of the Atlantic, with its emphasis on action-adventure plotting, heroic protagonists, scientific extrapolation for its own sake, clear good-versus-evil morality, conventional transparent writing style, and eschewing of explicit sexuality, and a new "speculative fiction" with its emphasis on stylistic and formal experimentalism, surrealism, inner space as opposed to outer space, the moral ambiguity of the workings of science, and characters who could not so clearly be seen to be either villains or heroes but rather complex and frequently psychologically tortured human beings attempting to cope with a problematical universe and failing as often as succeeding.

Even the most strident critics of the New Wave excoriated American and British writers alike for their "nihilism," "anti-rationalism," "anti-science biases," "pessimism," "lack of story-telling ability," and "sexual degeneracy," without resorting to chauvinistic national name-calling even in their most rabid diatribes.

Whatever one's allegiances at the time, however extreme the name-calling may have become, no one seemed to view the "New Wave controversy" on either side as anything but a literary dispute *within* the community of transatlantic science fiction.

Now, however, a sort of revisionist reinterpretation of the evolution of Anglophone SF seems to have subtly begun to emerge on both sides of the Atlantic in the delayed wake of the New Wave on the one hand, and the emergence of science fiction as a major commercial genre of general American publishing on the other.

In the American science fiction editorial community, the for-the-most-part-publicly-unspoken consensus perception has arisen that most of the science fiction currently written in Britain is no longer commercially viable in the United States. One prominent American SF editor has flatly stated that non-American science fiction doesn't sell in the United States and seems to have a conscious policy against publishing British work, with certain conspicuous exceptions.

Another prominent American editor, who did conscientiously attempt to publish a good deal of British and Australian science fiction has been heard to declare, somewhat in despair, that "the New Wave won in Britain and lost in the United States."

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What did he really mean by this cryptic remark? Perhaps the emerging British viewpoint puts it more clearly. According to many British writers and critics, those British SF writers who were successful in the United States were the ones who by and large eschewed the literary traditions of British science fiction all along, in favor of aping "American genre conventions."

According to this analysis, British science fiction, rather than growing out of a pulp adventure tradition, as American SF undeniably did, evolved out of the British literary mainstream, and was never really divorced from it and ghettoized into a commercial action-adventure genre until British SF writers began to write with the American market in mind. H.G. Wells, C.S. Lewis, Olaf Stapledon, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, and later even Anthony Burgess to some extent are seen as the literary progenitors of this "British" science fiction, which is to say that in Britain, unlike the United States, there is a long and honorable tradition of writers who wrote science fiction without being "science fiction writers." They were major literary figures, and, rather than attempting to fulfill the action-adventure genre parameters of American SF, they attempted successfully to write science fiction within the critical strictures of mainstream literature.

In the post-war era, their literary inheritors are Aldiss, Ballard, Michael Moorcock to a certain extent, even Wyndham and Christopher, Keith Roberts, D.G. Compton, and more recently, such writers as Ian Watson and Christopher Priest.

Literarily speaking, what these diverse writers share in common, and what they share with their illustrious literary ancestors, is a deemphasis of storylines based on action-adventure plotting, an eschewing of conventionally "heroic" protagonists in favor of more psychologically-rounded and idiosyncratically motivated characters, a sense of ambiguity and tragedy, a much more critical viewpoint on the moral and social consequences of scientific and technological civilization, and a more careful attention to the writing of their works in literarily acceptable prose.

Or, less high-mindedly put, typical American SF is commercially oriented schlock, whereas the best British SF aspires to and attains the status of true literature as defined by the accepted mavens of same.

And while they certainly wouldn't put it in such terms, many American editors and critics would seem to be saying much the same thing when they opine that British science fiction has lost its vigor, its sense of wonder, its connection to the qualities that the American audience wants in its science fiction. What do the Americans complain about when they put down British science fiction?

That it is lacking in action. That it is excessively pessimistic about

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the contributions of science and technology to Western culture, that it is imbued with a sense of gloom and doom, that it lacks strong characters with whom the reader can identify, that the writing itself lacks energy, that it is too obsessed with psychological inner space and too unenthusiastic about the wonders of outer space.

Ironically enough, these American critics of British SF and these British critics of American SF are essentially quite in agreement. The only real difference is that what the British see as virtues, the Americans see as flaws, and vice versa.

The results of such attitudes, it seems to me, have been entirely negative all around. Superficially, it would seem that the British have suffered the most. Writers like J.G. Ballard and Brian Aldiss have their best work published quite badly in the United States, when it is published at all. The best works of Ian Watson and Christopher Priest go begging for publication in the U.S. A whole new generation of science fiction writers seems to be growing up in Britain with little prospect of American publication.

The harm done to the Americans by this schism may be more subtle, but it is no less real. First of all, of course, a perusal of British critical journals reveals that American readers are being deprived of a large body of fascinating work, judging from the descriptions contained within reviews of many British novels unpublished in the United States. There was a time, for example, when D.G. Compton won acclaim in the U.S. for fine novels like *Synthajoy* and *The Steel Crocodile,* but now he seems unable to place his novels here at all. The same seems to be true of Keith Roberts, who was quite successful in the United States with such works as *Pavanne* and *The Passing of the Dragons,* but who now appears to have fallen silent from the perspective of this side of the Atlantic.

Most conspicuous of all, perhaps, is the case of Ian Watson, who, with the publication of such fine and innovative novels as *The Embedding, The Martian Inca, Alien Embassy,* and perhaps most conspicuous of all, *Miracle Visitors,* seemed to have established himself as one of the most significant new science fiction writers to emerge in the 1970s. Now, alas, while his reputation in Britain has continued to grow, he is almost entirely ignored in the U.S. Indeed Watson may be the first Anglophone SF writer to have become a central figure in Britain with only a minor following in the U.S. As for new British SF writers of promise, very few of even the best first, second, or third novels seem to be able to find American publishers.

As for American writers, a certain snobbishness against them seems to be in the process of insinuating itself into British critical circles. While thus far this has not made it much more difficult for Americans to secure British pub-

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lication for their works, it is beginning to work against the *manner* in which American works are published there. The transformation of the manner in which SF is published in the U.S. which has taken place in the past decade is now beginning to be mirrored in Britain, but with a peculiarly British difference.

In the United States today, while most SF continues to be published in the usual minimalist manner, it is now quite possible for the occasional SF novel to go all the way to the top of the bestseller lists. In Britain, a dichotomy of a somewhat different sort seems to be in the process of evolving. While hardcover publication seems to be all but evaporating for most science fiction, it is now possible for selected British SF novels to "break out," not so much into commercial bestsellerdom as into the realm of seriously regarded literary work. In Britain, serious critical attention both within the SF critical journals and the "mainstream" critical establishment has always been somewhat more important to a book's fate in the marketplace than in the U.S., and, in the case of the mainstream critical establishment, more readily attainable. British SF itself now seems to be in the early stages of its own internal dichotomization, into lightly regarded formula schlock on the one hand, and "seriously regarded literary science fiction" on the other. And at the moment most American SF tends to be considered almost automatically the former. Alas, this seems to be something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Science fiction which is published as formula schlock tends to be regarded as formula schlock and science fiction which is published as work of serious literary intent tends to be regarded as serious literature. Christopher Priest has even coined the term "visionary realism" in one more attempt to distinguish the "serious" stuff from the "genre SF" *a la* the attempt to label the same "speculative fiction" in the 1960s.

Finally, we are left with the two most important questions of all. Is there any truth in the criticism that the British are leveling at American SF in general and in the attitudes that the American SF editorial community has been taking towards British SF lately? And how is this schism affecting what is actually written on both sides of the Atlantic?

Certainly it cannot be denied that American science fiction evolved out of an action-adventure pulp tradition and that for most of its history it has been dominated by heroes, villains, formula plotting, and merely serviceable prose, rather than by formal and stylistic experimentation, psychological realism, and stories constructed around complex characterization. True, too, that much British SF which was commercially successful in the United States aped American genre conventions, even down to employing, in many cases,

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American settings and lead characters rather than British ones, sometimes to rather ludicrous effect. True as well that most of the bestselling American SF works of the past decade have succeeded commercially by following the strictures of popular rather than elite literary fiction.

As for the opposite side of the coin, it cannot be denied that a good deal of the science fiction which is most highly regarded in literary terms in Britain, is, to be blunt about it, boring to an American readership. Indeed it may be boring to a general British readership as well. For if many of the most literarily ambitious British SF writers have attempted to work within the critical strictures of the British literary establishment, gaining a certain polished sophistication of conventional prose, a certain ambiguity and subtlety of characterization, a certain way with the fine details of description, thereby, they have also picked up some of the flaws and weaknesses inherent in too punctilious a regard for the limitations of a rather ossified tradition which pays excessive homage to 19th-century concepts of literary virtue.

Indeed, in Britain, the New Wave movement was as much a rebellion against the stultifying effects of adherence to this so-called "Great Tradition" as it was a revolt against pulp genre formulas. It was Moorcock's aim from the beginning to fuse the true literary virtues of this elite literature with the freshness and vigor of popular literature, while tossing aside the excess baggage of both, to produce something new which would not only renovate science fiction but blow some fresh air into the stale drawing rooms of English literature as a whole.

Which is why, ultimately, that the American critics of British SF and the British critics of American SF are both right in the generality and both wrong in the particulars. The divergent histories of American and British science fiction have given both different characteristic virtues and flaws. And that is precisely why the best science fiction, the cutting creative edge of SF's ongoing evolution, has always been, and continues to be, *transatlantic.*

Prior to *Brave New World,* a novel set in the United States, Aldous Huxley wrote very much in the old constricted British literary tradition. Virtually from the beginning, Thomas M. Disch's novels have fused the strengths of American popular SF literature with the virtues of high literary style while abandoning the limitations of both. J.G. Ballard's evolution as a writer, at least in terms of form, owes a great deal to the American, William Burroughs, and much of his best work is not only set in the United States but employs American imagery. Gregory Benford's *Timescape* is a novel very much in the British tradition of C.P. Snow, and yet owes its transcendence of that tradition to a visionary esthetic of science that derives from

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American science fiction on the one hand and from the influence of such British writers as Olaf Stapledon and Arthur C. Clarke on the other. *Stand on Zanzibar,* still generally considered John Brunner's masterwork, and a Hugo winner to boot, is a novel by a Briton largely about America, and was directly influenced by the American mainstream writer John Dos Passos, as well as by the Canadian communications theorist Marshall McLuhan. Michael Bishop's work is generally recognized in Britain as possessing the "British" virtues, and he has collaborated transatlantically with Ian Watson. The as-yet-incomplete Helliconia trilogy is probably Brian Aldiss' most commercially successful work to be published in the United States to date, and seems to be a quite conscious attempt to fuse the British literary virtues with American commercial requirements.

So much of the best Anglophone science fiction has been and continues to be transatlantic in this sense precisely because writers who are open to binocular vision, who are willing to draw freely upon the generally characteristic virtues of both the American and British SF traditions, inherent talent being equal, are naturally going to produce more fully rounded work than writers unwilling to engage in the transatlantic dialectic.

Today, more than ever, science fiction on both sides of the Atlantic stands to gain from the continuation of this process. In the United States, science fiction has broken out of the genre ghetto in a commercial sense, but has yet to enter the mainstream of literature in a critical sense, and suffers thereby from a lack of absolute literary standards. In Britain, SF has its foot in the door of the literary salons but stands in danger of losing its commercial viability.

If British and American SF continue to drift away from the mutual influence which has created the Anglophone science fiction which presently dominates the literature, we may end up on the one hand with an American science fiction formularized and commercialized to the point of total literary triviality and on the other hand with a British science fiction appealing only to a handful of literary mandarins.

But if we can continue to learn from each other, influence each other, treat our respective differences as opportunities for growth rather than as flaws, then together we may yet create a new transatlantic literature that will be something new under the sun, a science fiction that both stands up to the highest possible literary standards and that can be read with pleasure by a mass audience throughout the English-speaking world and beyond.

And if we can do that, we will in justice be able to confront both the marketplaces and the critical establishments on both sides of the ocean and truly declare: we see the future, and it is us. ●

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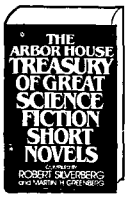

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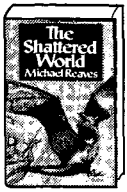

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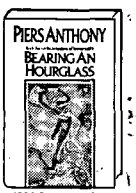

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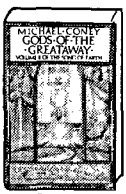

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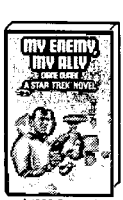

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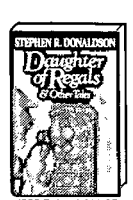

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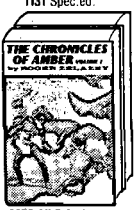

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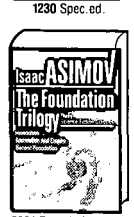

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